

The
X BAR X BOYS
On The
RANCH

JAMES CODY FERRIS



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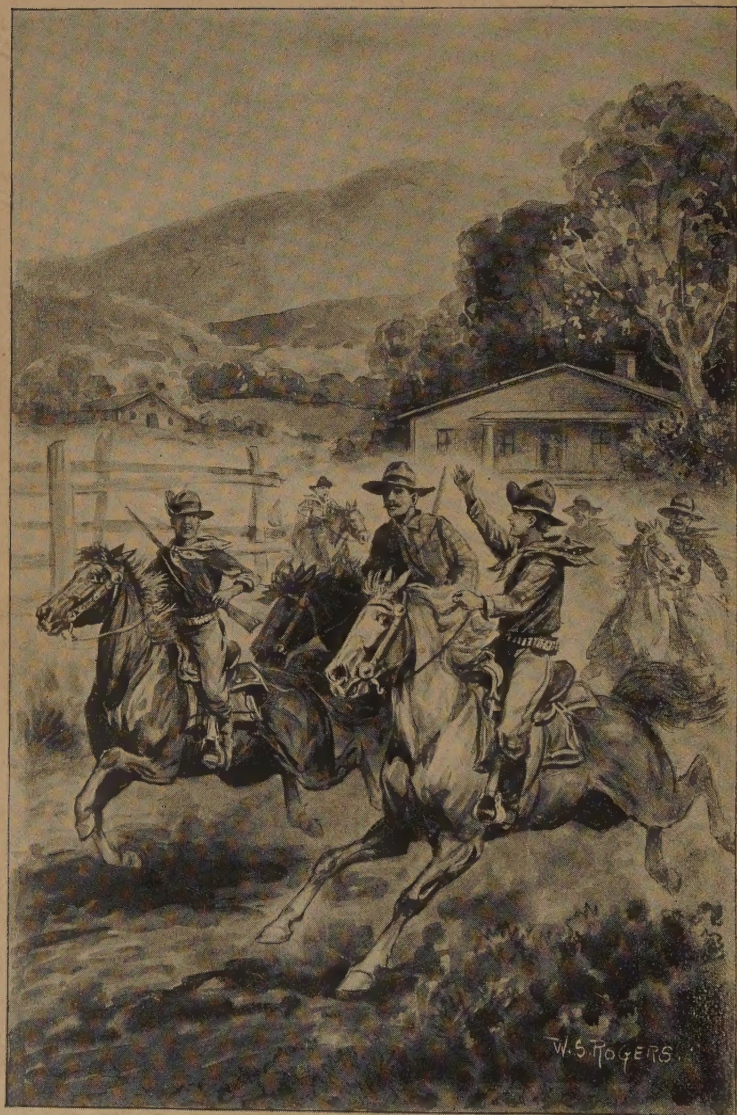
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DOWN TOWARD THE ROAD SWEEP THE RIDERS.
The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch. Frontispiece—(Page 42)

THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH

BY

JAMES CODY FERRIS

AUTHOR OF "THE X BAR X BOYS IN THUNDER CANYON,"
"THE X BAR X BOYS ON WHIRLPOOL RIVER," ETC.

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WESTERN STORIES FOR BOYS

By JAMES CODY FERRIS

THE X BAR X BOYS BOOKS

THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH

THE X BAR X BOYS IN THUNDER CANYON

THE X BAR X BOYS ON WHIRLPOOL RIVER

THE X BAR X BOYS ON BIG BISON TRAIL

THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP

(OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION.)

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The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch

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THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH

CHAPTER I

THE ROAD TO EAGLES

Two boys loped along the winding, dusty road on the way to Eagles. One of them, astride a white-faced mustang, was leading a third horse, a bay, which, though riderless, was saddled and bridled. The day was hot; the road steep and tortuous; and the riderless horse, with head held low, was doing his best to retard the procession.

Taking a firmer hold of the leading rein, the boy gave it a jerk forward.

“Come up here, General!” he cried. “Where do you think you’re going—to a funeral? Pretty near train time and we still have a good stretch ahead of us!”

His companion, a slightly older youth, riding a brown pony, turned in his saddle.

“Is he holding back on you, Teddy? Those Spanish bridles make awfully poor leading. I think he’s got a sore mouth. And, if he has, dad’ll find it out quick!”

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"Boy, don't I know it! Why," Teddy Manley added with a chuckling laugh, "I bet dad could tell if General didn't sleep well the night before. He sure is crazy over this horse!"

"I'll tell a maverick he is!" cried Roy Manley. "Last thing he told me before he left was to be sure to bring General in to meet him. But as far as liking goes, you don't exactly hate that Flash of yours, I notice."

The other boy grinned and patted the side of his bronco.

"Well," he admitted, "I'm not saying much, but *you* have no right to talk about falling in love with a horse. The way you treat Star would make any one think he was made of cut-glass! All the while it's 'easy now, Star, you might hurt yourself! Is that cinch-strap too tight, Star? Here, let me brush that fly off your ear!' Huh! Do you tuck him in bed and kiss him good-night, Roy?"

Roy Manley refused the bait.

"I remember," he said calmly, wiping the sweat from his upper lip and leaving in its stead a streak of black dust, "when you first got Flash. Dad gave him to you for your birthday. You were just a little shaver then—"

"Aw, donkey-dust! Who do you think you are—Methuselah? Just because you're a year older—"

"You were just a little shaver then," Roy went on imperturbably, "and maybe you didn't

know what you were doing. You simply went into ecstasy. Get that—ecstasy? Sixty-cent word. Yep, you jumped up and down with glee, I'll tell a maverick!"

"Well, if I jumped up and down with glee, you, by golly, stood on your head when dad gave you Star! Now laugh that off!"

"We won't argue about it," Roy replied, with assumed dignity. "Baby, this road is sure some dusty! Wind's right at our backs, too. If I took a drink of water now I'd turn into a mud-pie. Hey, Teddy, think you can coax that cayuse you're riding into something more than a trickle? Maybe he'll run, if you talk to him real nice."

Teddy Manley did not reply, but clucked softly to his mount. Flash responded with a leap that caused General, the bay that Teddy was leading, to toss his head in protest.

"You'd better be careful," Roy cautioned. "There's only one man who can boss General, and that's dad. If the bay takes it into his head to stop, he'll *stop*, and neither one of us will be able to budge him. Then dad's train will pull in, and he'll expect to find General at the station waiting for him. And where'll we be?"

"Down in the cellar eating spinach," Teddy answered, with a grin. "Flash, here, won't let General balk on us! will you, old boy?" and Teddy leaned forward and rubbed the horse's

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nose. Flash muzzled his master's hand affectionately.

"Why don't you let up on that mush?" Roy asked in a disgusted tone. "Go on, whisper pretty nothings in his ear! Talk about me and Star! Why, when Gilly Froud—"

Eyes blazing, Teddy turned swiftly on his brother.

"Don't mention that cur's name to me," he said thickly. "You know what he did to Flash? He kicked him, that's what he did! Kicked him! And if dad hadn't stopped me, I'd have—I'd have—"

"Cool off, cool off," Roy advised soothingly. "I don't like Froud any more than you do. You know that. Anyway, dad threw him off the ranch, so let's forget him. Come on, step on it. dad's train is due soon."

Breathing heavily at the memory of Froud's mistreatment of Flash, Teddy pulled General's leading rein and urged his own mount to a faster pace.

This Gilly Froud had been a hand on the X Bar X ranch, which was owned by Mr. Manley, the father of Roy and Teddy. One day the ranch owner had caught Froud abusing Flash. Teddy had come around the corner of the bunkhouse at the same instant, and took in the scene at a glance. White to the lips, the boy started for Froud. Mr. Manley took one look at his son's face, and, springing forward, seized

Teddy by the shoulders. Flash—Teddy's Flash—had been kicked, and Teddy had seen it. Mr. Manley tightened his grip on his son's shoulders. There was not going to be that sort of fight on his ranch if he could prevent it.

Teddy had come to his senses quickly, and Mr. Manley released him. Then he turned and looked at Froud, whose face was sickly pale underneath his tan. After this occurrence, Froud went away from that ranch in something of a hurry.

As Teddy recalled the incident, his fist clenched and he unconsciously drew up on Flash's rein. The horse snorted and shook his head, as though he knew what was passing through his master's mind.

"Always did hate a man who mistreated a horse," Teddy murmured. "Sure to be something else the matter with him. No decent fellow would kick a pony."

"Still thinking about Gilly Froud?" Roy asked. "Come on, snap out of it! Lots of nicer things to think about. For instance, that wrist watch you bought at school. Baby, wait till Nick Looker finds out you own a wrist watch! Maybe he won't ride you a little!"

Teddy grinned in reply, and pushed his sombrero back from his forehead. It was certainly a hot day.

The two Manley brothers, Teddy, aged fifteen, and Roy, one year older, were at home,

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for a long time, they hoped, if not for good, from the Hopper Boarding School, an institution just outside of Denver. Teddy had the golden hair and blue eyes of his mother, Barbara Manley, "the blonde angel of the West," her husband often jokingly called her. But the laugh that always went with this remark deceived no one—least of all the boys. They caught the note of love in their father's voice, and it found an echo in their own hearts.

"Jinks! She *is* an angel!"

Roy, the taller of the two, had hair as brown as the hills around him, and eyes but a trifle lighter in hue. He it was who had inherited from his mother a fondness for literature, and, though this last was carefully concealed, a liking for poetry.

Barbara Manley, before her marriage, had been a teacher of English in a Denver school, and until she had met Bardwell Manley, poetry had been her only sweetheart. Her eyes would shine with maternal pride when she observed Roy reading a "book of silly verses," as Teddy called it.

Yet Roy was a real boy. More, he was a real Western boy, which is saying a great deal. He was one of the best shots on the X Bar X ranch, and although Teddy had a slight edge on him when it came to riding, Roy could "fork" an unbroken bronco almost as well as any man on

the ranch. In build the boys were much alike—lean, wiry products of range life.

Their father, Bardwell Manley, owned the X Bar X, a cattle ranch some thirty hours' ride "on the cars" west from Chicago on Rocky Run River, a small stream. This ranch had been in the Manley family since Temple Manley, the boys' grandfather, now several years dead, had settled there in 1868.

Roy and Teddy, together with their sister, Belle Ada, a girl now twelve years old, had, of course, lived much of their lives on the X Bar X. But as soon as they became old enough Mrs. Manley had insisted that the two brothers go away to study in Denver, and the last three winters Roy and Teddy had spent at the Hopper Academy.

Although their school days were happy enough, both boys were always eager for summer to come, bringing with it vacation time, which meant the ranch, with Flash and Star to gallop about on over many a winding trail. Roy and Teddy had the real cowboy's love for a good pony and the wind-swept range. Though they did as well as most boys at their studies and Roy rather better than the average, they were both eager for the time to come when they could leave school and follow in the footsteps of their father.

It was now the third week since school had closed, and to-day the boys were riding to

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Eagles, a railroad station twelve miles from the X Bar X, to meet Mr. Mänley, who had stipulated that they must bring his own special mount, General, for him to ride back. Of course they could have made the trip in an auto, but Mr. Manley always said he preferred "hoss flesh to flivvers."

"Shucks! I don't see the use of having an auto trail to Eagles when dad rides General all the time," Teddy half grumbled as he sank his chin deeper into his neckerchief. "This is too blame dusty!"

In the memory of some at the X Bar X, there had been a time when this road, winding up the mountain, had been just a trail, hardly wide enough for two horses abreast. But the auto had since invaded the West, and had widened the path into a dusty highway. In the opinion of Roy and Teddy Manley, it was a change for the worse.

"Stop beefing," challenged Roy, grinning. "Here! Take a look at that and be thankful you're allowed to live in the country!"

The two boys had come to a turn in the road almost at the top of the mountain. The horses stood, champing their bits, on a small plateau. The road wound itself about the elevation on either side, stretching out like a long, brown ribbon. To the left, where the highway made its sharpest curve, was a small slope, and beyond this the mountain seemed to have been

shorn off with a giant axe, making a sheer drop of some three hundred feet.

Often and often the boys traveled this road, yet each time they reached Bitter Cliff, as it was called, and looked off over that vast stretch of country, they halted, fascinated anew by the beauty of the scene before them.

Down below, the whole range was spread out in a clear-cut panorama. Far in the rear rose the ranch buildings of X Bar X; the mess-house, where Sing Lung, the cook, invented the sometimes strange but always very palatable combinations of food; the high-fenced corral, now almost empty, for the cattle were out on the grazing ground; the ranch house—the home of Roy and Teddy; the “bronco-peeler’s” bunk-house; and the Rocky Run River, like a streak of dull silver, flowing placidly through a border of cottonwoods and willows about half a mile from the ranch house.

To the west, like another section of some great map, lay 8 X 8 ranch, owned by Peter Ball, an old friend and neighbor of Bardwell Manley.

“She’s sure some view!” exclaimed Teddy, with a long, indrawn sigh of peace and satisfaction. “Some view! Just as good as that picture of the Great Open Spaces we’ve got hanging up in the school auditorium.”

“Huh! Comparing this to a *picture!*” Roy

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snorted. "Why, man, this is *real*! As good as a picture! Huh!"

"All right! All right!" Teddy said easily. "Then it isn't! You can't get me sore," he smiled amiably.

"What isn't?" demanded his brother. "You mean to tell me you'd speak of a picture in our school auditorium in the same breath with—with—" and Roy flung out his arm in a mute and helpless gesture of finality.

"All right, I said! Go easy with that arm of yours! You made General jump then! But look! Isn't the air clear? You can almost count the horses down at 8 X 8!"

"So you can. Well, we'd better be on our way. Dad won't want to be kept waiting. He'll be anxious to climb aboard General again, after a week of walking and flivvers in the city."

"My boy, that's just what I've been thinking. You show remarkable powers of perception. As soon as you can wake up that cayuse of yours, we'll be moving."

CHAPTER II

A DISHEARTENING LOSS

CLUCKING to their horses, the Manley boys proceeded toward Eagles. The road led downward now, and the going was easier.

"Speaking of the 8 X 8, did you hear what happened there?" Teddy asked, as he pulled gently on General's leading rein.

"Yep! Twenty head of short-horn Durhams stolen; wasn't it? Pete ought to put better men to riding his cattle."

"Now, I don't know," Teddy replied slowly. "They've got some good punchers over on the 8 X 8. Why I figure it, those rustlers are mighty clever. They ride into a herd at night, cut out as many head as they can handle, and drive 'em away before the riders can get to them. But, by jinks, they'd better not try to get away with any of the X Bar X cattle! They'll have one sweet fight on their hands if they do;" Teddy looked down at the side of his saddle where the insignia X—X, burned in the leather, could be plainly seen. The X Bar X was proud of its mark. It stood for many years of upright, square dealing.

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Pop Burns, the oldest hand on the X Bar X ranch, claimed that he had "invented" the brand for Temple Manley, the grandfather of Roy and Teddy. Pop was inordinately boastful of this distinction, which he had conferred on himself, and he never tired of telling newcomers how he had happened to hit on the device of the "two sawbucks with a piece of rail fence in between," as he sometimes described it. So vain was he of the mark that he placed it on everything brandable—saddles, bridles, wagons, the autos, and all. Jim Casey claimed he had even caught Pop marking Jim's fancy vest with the X Bar X, but this the veteran denied.

"Yes, sir, there'll certainly be something doing if those rustlers take any of our stuff," Teddy went on. "Pop would be on their necks in a minute! I can just see the old geezer raving mad, and frothing around about: 'Steal one of my brands, will ye? I'll get ye fer that if it takes me ten years!' Oh, baby!" and Teddy laughed.

"That's right!" Roy remarked. "But, say, I hope dad's train is late. If it isn't, we'll never make it! Come on, let's hit it up!"

The boys urged the horses to a faster pace, and, somewhat winded, reached the station at Eagles in a cloud of dust, much of which clung to them and their mounts, where they slipped from the saddles with grunts of relief. They tied the three horses to a hitching rail not far

from the station and concealed from the highway and the railroad office by a rough shack that served as freight and express depot.

"Yep, she's late, all right," announced Foley, the ticket agent, as the boys tramped into the station. "All of thirty minutes behind time. Your dad's comin' to-day, ain't he? I see you got General out there. Spotted him when ye swung around to tie up. That road to your place must be some dusty, with the wind blowin' up your back, hey?"

"I'll tell a maverick it is!" agreed Roy, and then he and his brother, after a glance about the dingy waiting room, sauntered out to look over the town.

Perhaps "town" would be dignifying Eagles beyond its merits. There was a main street, consisting of two restaurants, a post-office, six stores and the railroad station. A little way down the track was a large corral, used as a temporary retention place for dealers who sent their steers to this point to be shipped. Often there would be a delay of a day or more before sufficient cattle cars would arrive at Eagles.

It was the cattle that brought the station; the station brought the town, and the town brought all sorts of things, one of which was now leaning against the front of Rimor's Place, hat pulled low over his face, smoke from an invisible cigarette drifting lazily about his head.

Rimor's Place was one of the two restaurants,

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although as an eating house it failed to qualify. Yet its habitués were never heard to complain of the quality of its food. The "hard-stuff" was good.

"There's a tough-looking baby," Teddy said in a low voice, nodding toward the figure of the man outside of Rimor's. "Seems like his breakfast had soured on him."

"It's a rare bunch that hangs out at Duck Rimor's," Roy replied. "They ought to close that place. Slim Dery's restaurant is enough for Eagles," he declared emphatically.

A short time later the brothers again stood on the station platform, eagerly watching for the express from the city. It pulled in, and a tall, well set-up man of perhaps fifty-five alighted. He wore a heavy dark mustache, and beneath his broad sombrero his black hair was here and there tinged with gray. As his foot struck the platform he reached in his pocket, and by the time Roy and Teddy had greeted him, a corn-cob pipe reposed in the corner of his mouth.

"Hello there, Roy and Teddy! The two sons of the prairie come to meet their father, who has been far away in the land of the snicker-snackers! Greetings! Boys, I've got a surprise for you."

"What is it, Dad?" Roy asked, grinning at his father.

"A whiffletree, hey, Dad?" Teddy inquired.

"No, not a whiffletree. Nor a wham-wicker either. Behold! Nell and Ethel, allow me to present my two dutiful sons, Roy and Teddy. Pardon me, Theodore! Boys, this is Nell Willis, and this Ethel Carew. They're Peter Ball's nieces."

The boys now saw two young girls, of about their own age, who had just stepped from the train to the platform. Small hats were set over piquant faces; laughing eyes looked into those of Roy and Teddy. Somewhat in a daze, the boys acknowledged the introduction.

"Yes," went on Mr. Manley, tamping the tobacco gently down into his pipe, "they're Peter Ball's nieces from New York, goin' to visit the 8 X 8. Met 'em on the train. I used to know 'em a long time ago—" applying a match to the pipe—"but they wouldn't remember me. I want 'em both to come over and see your sister, Belle Ada," he explained to the boys. "Golly, it's good to be back again!" Thereat, with a contented sigh, he blew out a huge cloud of fragrant smoke.

"Oh, we'd love to come!" one of the girls said, she whom Mr. Manley had introduced as Nell Willis. Then she looked at Roy. "You know, I've always wanted to come West. I think it's so—so weird, don't you?"

"Weird?" Roy repeated, as though to himself. "You mean—weird? Oh, yes! Sure! Awfully weird! Yep! Sure is!"

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“And do you ride just all the time?” the other, Ethel Carew, asked Teddy.

“Who, me? Nope! Sit down to eat,” and Teddy grinned. Nice eyes the girl had.

“How’s your mother?” Mr. Manley interrupted.

“Fine,” Roy answered, turning to his father. “She’ll be glad to see you again. She’s been a little lonesome.”

“No trouble?” his father asked quickly. “I heard something about rustlers getting away with some of the 8 X 8 stock. Man on the train told me. They haven’t been around our place, have they?”

“Not that I know of,” Roy replied. “I guess mother’s been a bit upset ever since—er—” He glanced over at Teddy, who was explaining to Ethel Carew why they called a cowboy a puncher. “Ever since you had that fuss with Gilly Froud,” Roy went on. “She’s always sort of afraid he’ll come back and do some damage.”

Mr. Manley scowled and removed his pipe from his mouth.

“He better not let me catch him around the X Bar X,” he said sternly. “And if he’s wise, he’ll steer clear of Teddy, too. Froud may be big, but I wouldn’t bet a plugged nickel on him if Teddy ever saw him kick Flash again.”

“Oh, Mr. Manley, did I hear some one say something about rustlers?” exclaimed Nell

Willis. "I'd just *love* to see a real, live rustler. Did you ever shoot one, Mr. Manley?"

"Who, me? Shoot a rustler?" Roy's father demanded. Then he saw that Nell was looking at Roy. "Oh, you mean him. I thought you were talkin' to me. That's Roy, there."

The girl reddened slightly.

"Roy, then! And you call me Nell. But tell me—did you ever shoot a rustler—Roy?"

"No, I can't say that I did," Roy answered, with a laugh. "But if you'd like it, I'll try to arrange to do it for you," and he laughed again.

"Oh, no!" Nell replied with a pretended shiver. "I don't want you to do it. I just wondered if you *had*."

"Roy's only joking," Mr. Manley stated. "People back East think we've got nothing to do but chase Indians and string up hoss-thieves. Why, even if there were Indians runnin' around loose, we wouldn't have time to chase 'em. We have plenty to do on a ranch without lookin' for trouble," he declared. "That reminds me, Teddy—who's doin' most of the outridin' these days?" Outriding was the process of investigating the condition of the stock on the range.

"Nat Raymond and Jim Casey, mostly," Teddy answered. "Then, I thought maybe it would be a good idea to have Nick Looker take a hand, too. Since the rustlers started raiding

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the 8 X 8, I've been kind of worried about our own cattle."

"Yes, have Nick do that," replied the lad's father approvingly. Mr. Manley thought it best that his sons should assume responsibility early in life. Accordingly, he gave each one the practical management of the ranch on alternate weeks. This week Teddy had been the foreman.

"Well, no use standin' out in the hot sun," Mr. Manley continued, with a glance at the fair skin of the two girls. He wondered how long it would be before a coat of tan covered those pink-and-white faces. "Roy, just cart the bags into the depot, will you? Some one coming out from the 8 X 8 for you, I take it?" and he looked over at Nell and Ethel.

"We expect a car," Ethel answered dubiously. "Although Uncle Peter may send horses—" and she glanced down at her traveling dress.

"Now, don't worry about that," Mr. Manley said, with a hearty laugh. "We have autos out here, same as you have in New York. Pete's got two of the finest cars in the state, though mostly he uses flivvers. You won't have to fork no brone—pardon me, I mean ride a horse."

Seizing the girls' two bags, Roy carried them into the station while the others followed more slowly. Mr. Manley had but a small hand bag,

and Teddy left this with the station agent to be brought over later on the wagon. When the ranch-owner traveled, he wanted to be ready to "light out in a hurry," as he expressed it. Usually a clean shirt and some collars completed his traveling kit. Mr. Manley had lived in the West all his life, and had the Westerner's contempt for "dofunnies," as unnecessary equipment was called.

"But once you get used to a horse," Mr. Manley went on, as he walked toward the rear of the station, "you'll never set foot inside an auto again," he assured the girls. "Now, I have a horse I call General. Gentle, strong, and quick as a flash. Him, me, an' this corn-cob pipe have been through plenty of rough places together in the last four years. Tell you, I wouldn't trade General for ten of the best mustangs in the state!" and he nodded his head decidedly, so that little rings of smoke detached themselves from the bowl of the pipe and drifted gently away.

"I'm sure we'll just love it out here," Ethel remarked enthusiastically. "Of course, we've both ridden in the city, but we always used much smaller saddles than you use here," she commented as she saw a rider pause in front of Rimor's Place.

"Postage stamps!" Mr. Manley said, with a grin. "That's what we call those saddles out West. The kind we ride are real saddles. Like

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the one I have on General, for instance. He wouldn't know what to do if some one pasted one of those English saddles on his back."

By this time they had reached the corner of the station. Back of the freight station the three horses had been tied by Roy and Teddy. Mr. Manley was in the lead. He turned suddenly and faced Nell and Ethel.

"Now I'm goin' to show you three of the prettiest ponies you ever saw," he declared. "Whenever I go to the city I always have Roy or Teddy meet me with General, so's I can ride back on him. I suppose you tied 'em in the usual place, Teddy?" he asked.

"I sure did, Dad," Teddy answered. "Tied right on the old rail."

With a smile of anticipation on his face, Mr. Manley stepped forward. Then he paused, and those behind him heard him give a gasp of surprise.

"Why," he said in a puzzled tone, "what's this? A joke?"

Roy and Teddy stepped quickly forward. Their eyes stared at the rail. Where the ponies had stood, there remained nothing but the hoofprints in the soft dirt of the spot!

The horses were gone!

CHAPTER III

A PUNCHER IN A CHECKERED SHIRT

Roy craned his neck forward, eyes wide. Mr. Manley stood with hands on hips, legs spread, staring intently at the vacant hitching rail. The corn-cob pipe drooped at a downward angle.

Teddy passed the back of his hand over his forehead, pushing back his hat.

"Why, that's funny," he said in a dazed voice. "They don't seem to be here."

"They—they must have wandered off," Roy said uncertainly. "Queer. They were all tied tight. I wonder—"

"You mean to say they were here, and now they're gone?" Mr. Manley asked, a new note creeping into his voice.

"The horses were here, all right," Teddy declared unevenly. "I can't understand it."

"Well, I can!" Mr. Manley cried. His eyes were blazing. "They've been stolen! Those ponies ain't the kind to wander around, once they're tied up. They've been stolen an' nothin' less!" he thundered.

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“What happened? Is something the matter?” Nell asked, as she and Ethel faced Mr. Manley.

“You bet there’s something the matter!” the cattleman roared. “There’s a whole lot the matter! My hoss has been taken right from under my nose—stolen from Eagles in broad daylight! What kind of a town is this, anyway? Hey you!” He strode over to a cowboy who was leaning against the door jamb at Rimor’s. Roy and Teddy realized that he was the man they had noticed when they reached town.

“You know anything about three hosses that were tied to that rail?”

The puncher tilted his head back, and looked insolently out from under the rim of his hat.

“What hosses?”

“*My* hosses! Those boys over there tied them to the rail. Now they’re gone! You see anything of ’em?”

“Nope.”

“How long you been here?”

“Not so long.”

“You were here when we rode in!” Teddy cried hotly, crossing the street. “He must have seen them, Dad; he’s been there for half an hour. The ponies were stolen while Roy and I came around to the front of the station to watch for the train.”

The puncher turned his head lazily and stared coldly at Teddy.

"You're, mebby, one of them correspondence school detectives, hey?" he sneered.

"Don't get funny," Teddy advised, his eyes narrowing. "Roy and I both saw you here when we rode up. You know we tied the ponies to that hitching rail. And you've been here ever since. The brones are gone. Who took them?"

The cowboy removed the cigarette from his mouth and straightened. Then he hitched up his belt and faced Teddy.

"Listen, kid," he said slowly, "I don't know nothin' about yore horses. Mebby I was here all the time, an' mebby I wasn't. That's my business. But get this straight! No baby is goin' to order me around. I don't know who you are, an' I don't give a hoot. I ain't in the habit of mindin' brones, an' you can pack that behind the rim of yore derby. Understand?" Deliberately he flicked his cigarette toward Teddy, sending a shower of sparks into the boy's face. Turning abruptly he entered the restaurant.

Eyes flashing, Teddy started forward. His father laid a hand on the boy's arm.

"Not here," he said in a tense voice. "Don't start a fight here. You know what Rimor's is. We have women-folks along." Unconsciously the man slid his hand to his side, where in the

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old days would have hung his gun. Now his hand came away empty.

"All right, Dad—if you say so," Teddy said through clenched teeth. "But I'll remember that bird! I'll remember him!" It was difficult for the boy to hold himself in check. He could not trust himself to say more.

Roy hurried over to his brother.

"Come on, Teddy. Let's go," he said evenly. "Maybe Foley can tell us something about the ponies."

At that moment the ticket agent came hurriedly across the street.

"Somethin' wrong, Bardwell?" he asked Mr. Manley. "Thought I heard your voice takin' a work-out."

"You did," Mr. Manley answered grimly. "Our hosses are gone."

"Sho!" Foley looked across to the hitching rail. "By golly, they are! I was outside and saw Teddy and Roy tie 'em up there, too! Now that's right queer. Where you suppose they went?"

"They didn't go no place, Hank! They were stolen!"

"Sho! You don't say! Stolen!" Foley gave a long whistle, and, removing his hat, scratched the bald spot on the top of his head. "Mighty queer how they could be stolen with so many people around. You ask anybody if they saw 'em?"

Mr. Manley gave a short laugh.

"I just had a sweet bit o' conversation with one of your choice characters," he said. "Puncher that was standin' right here all the time an' must have seen the brons taken. He told us to go chase our own hosses."

"What did he look like?" Foley asked in an interested tone.

"Tall, kind of stringy looking," Teddy answered quickly. "Squint eyes. Checkered wool shirt. No vest. He's inside Rimor's now."

The ticket agent nodded sagely.

"I know the waddy. Came to town about three days ago. Don't know where he sleeps, but he spends most of his time hanging around Duck Rimor's."

Teddy nodded.

"Stranger here. From up around Montana, most likely. So he was nasty, hey?"

"He wasn't any too polite, from what I saw," Roy broke in.

Mr. Manley looked over at Teddy. The boy was staring intently at the door through which the puncher had disappeared.

"We have got to get busy," the cattle owner said in a loud voice. Of a sudden his face darkened. Deliberately he tapped the tobacco out from his pipe by knocking the bowl against the palm of his hand. Then he placed the pipe in his pocket.

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"We have got to get busy," he repeated in a quieter tone, "an' quick. General has been stolen. Flash an' Star along with him. We're goin' after the man that took 'em an' get our hosses back." He turned and walked swiftly to the other side of the street, where the two girls had been silently watching the scene.

"I'm thinking that whoever stole your dad's hoss made a poor bargain," Foley said to Roy. "I know Bardwell. I saw him look like that before, when back in ninety-eight Slag Wallace shot a dog your dad owned. Slag ain't around now. Yep, the waddy who picked up General is going to be mighty sorry."

Roy and Teddy followed their father without a word, leaving Foley standing in the street, rubbing his bald spot with a puzzled air.

Nell Willis and Ethel Carew were waiting, eyes full of questions. Nell started the attack.

"Did that cowman want to fight?" she asked, gazing full at Roy. "He seemed awfully mean. Maybe he didn't like to have us standing here watching. But I simply couldn't leave; could you, Ethel? It was so thrilling! Did he have a gun? I didn't see one. Why didn't he answer your questions about the horses?"

"He had his reasons, I guess," Roy answered a trifle shortly. Star was gone, and here he stood listening to a lot of chatter. Still, Nell was pretty! Maybe she had got scared

when that puncher started to act up. Roy's eyes softened, and he looked at the girl with a new interest. Probably she didn't know much about the West. Why, her face wasn't even a little bit tanned! She seemed pale, even! Maybe she *was* scared!

"I just hated that man when he threw that cigarette at you!" Ethel burst out impetuously to Teddy. "That was an awfully mean thing to do!"

"I know it," Teddy answered in a low voice. He turned to his father, who was staring up the road. "Dad, we've got to get back and get some more brones. How are you figuring on going?"

"Can't you come with us?" Ethel asked. "Uncle Peter said he would send a car. It must have been delayed, but I'm sure it will come."

"Yes, if Bug Eye brings a car for you, we can all pile in. Bug Eye usually drives for old man—pardon me, I mean Mr. Ball."

"That'll be fine!" Nell said enthusiastically.

"Here comes something now," Mr. Manley stated, peering up the road. "Lots of dust, anyhow. Sounds like a flivver. Yes, that's Bug Eye. Tell the way he drives. All over the place."

With an elaborate jamming on of brakes and swinging of front wheels, a car pulled up alongside of the waiting group. Following closely

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was a cloud of dust, which enveloped the auto the moment it stopped. From within the cloud came a voice:

“Whoa there, you tin-plated bronc, you! Pull up on yo’ busted axles! Plant yo’ locoed wheels and stay set! Stop that shakin’! *Stop* it, I say! Boil me in oil, if I don’t rip yo’ carburetor right out o’ you! Try to bounce the liver outta me, hey? Why, you salivated piece of yaller-backed tin, I’ll— Excuse *me*, ma’am!”

The dust had blown away, disclosing the surprised face of Bug Eye Wilson.

“I shore didn’t know you was here,” he said to Nell and Ethel, with an embarrassed grin. “I wouldn’t have talked like that if I’d knowed ladies was around. I don’t never do such things. But this hopper-necked, sawed off, lead mule—pardon *me*, ma’am! I forgot!”

Nell and Ethel were doing their best to preserve straight faces, but the task was almost too much for them. Ethel had to press a handkerchief to her mouth, while her eyes watered with strangled mirth.

“You’re—you’re late, aren’t you?” Nell asked, trying to control her voice.

“Yes, ma’am. Got a puncture. Had to put on a new tire. Then this—this—well, ma’am, you know what I mean!”

“Yes, I guess I do,” Nell answered faintly. “But I’m glad you came. Mr. Manley’s horses

have been stolen, and he and Roy and Teddy are going to ride back with us."

"Hey! What's that?" Bug Eye turned swiftly toward the ranchman, the grin fading suddenly from his face. "Broncs gone, honest?"

"Sure have gone," answered Mr. Manley laconically. "Hooked. Rustled. Stolen. Whatever you've a mind to call it. And right off the main street of Eagles!" he added bitterly.

Of a sudden, he turned and walked rapidly down the street.

"What's the game, Dad?" asked Roy, not quite able to account for his father's action.

"You stay there. I'll be back in a minute," Mr. Manley called over his shoulder. "I want to see what I can find out about this."

In a moment he was out of sight behind the freight shed. The two boys wanted to go with him, but Roy mentioned to Teddy that they had been told to stay where they were.

"I hope dad doesn't get into a scrap," murmured the older lad.

"I don't reckon he will," remarked Bug Eye. "But if he does, all he needs is to sing out, an' we'll all come runnin'!"

The anxiety of Teddy and Roy was soon at an end, for in a few minutes their father reappeared. He looked tired and dusty, but there was a grim smile on his face.

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"Some of the railroad men down at the corral saw 'em," Mr. Manley reported to his sons. "There were three fellows leading our three horses away."

"Why didn't they stop 'em?" Roy wanted to know.

"They didn't have any cause to, son. Thought the men owned the horses, as was natural. Those fellows didn't wear any brand to let folks know they were rustlers."

"No, I reckon not," agreed Teddy slowly.

"Did you find out which way they went?" asked Roy eagerly.

"Not much satisfaction in questioning those railroad fellows," answered Mr. Manley in discouraged tones. "They couldn't follow an elephant's trail, much less notice which way hoss-thieves took. Some say the scoundrels went one way and some say another. All they appeared to notice was three shady-looking chaps leadin' three horses."

"Then there isn't much chance of heading them off, is there?" asked one of the girls.

"I wouldn't say that," was Mr. Manley's answer. "If they took the back trail over the mountain there's a chance that we can nab 'em before they get into the rough going, if we make it quick. Once there, though, it's a toss-up if we ever see our ponies again, boys!"

His sons knew just how Mr. Manley felt over this loss.

"The back trail!" mused Bug Eye. "Yes, if they went that way yo'-all have a chance of headin' 'em off. Ain't this a fine town, though, where a man can't leave a hoss hitched for a few minutes without some doggoned rustler steps up an' rides it off? But better pile in my flivver, Mr. Manley, an' I'll git ye back to yo' ranch quicker'n ef yo' walked. You'll want to saddle up an' chase after them thieves, I reckon!"

"That's right!" agreed the ranch-owner. "We'll be glad of a lift."

"How long did you leave the horses here?" asked Nell.

"Just while we were waiting for the train, which was late," answered Roy, while Bug Eye got out to crank the flivver, the self-starter of which, he announced apologetically, "was on the cheese."

"And some one took them away from the rail to which they were tied?" the girl went on.

"Stepped right up to the rail and helped themselves," said Teddy.

"It's a wonder some one didn't see them."

"Well," admitted Roy, "the rail isn't in plain sight except from certain places. And, I suppose, even if some one had seen the actual theft taking place, they would think that it was the real owners of the horses who were unhitching them."

"Maybe," agreed his father doubtfully.

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"Anyway, no one seems to have done anything toward stopping them."

"But there are some here who know more about it than they are letting on," murmured Teddy and he looked significantly across the street toward Duck Rimor's place.

"It shore is too bad," affirmed Bug Eye. "But pile in, everybody! It's going to be a tight squeeze, but these flivvers are made of rubber, I guess. Got bags, ladies? All right, Teddy! Chuck 'em in the back. Shore, put yo' dad's in there, too! All ready? Here we go! Hang on!"

The car started with a jerk, the transmission bands being worn thin. Roy looked around from the front seat to see that they cleared the edge of the station, which they did by the fraction of an inch. Bug Eye was eccentric in his driving at times.

As Roy gazed, he noticed a figure coming out of Duck Rimor's. It was the cowboy in the checkered shirt. Catching the ranch boy's eyes, the puncher grinned derisively and waved mockingly at the departing auto.

CHAPTER IV

A CLUE

As the automobile careened along the dusty road, a strained silence settled over the occupants. The only sounds were the muffled exhaust of the motor and the squeaking and groaning of the springs as the car bounced its way toward the X Bar X.

Bug Eye and Roy were in the front seat and Mr. Manley and the two girls were seated in the rear. Teddy was supporting himself upon a rear door of the touring car, clenching the sides to hold his place against the joltings of the flivver, and bent almost double to avoid hitting the roof whenever Bug Eye dived into a particularly deep rut.

Thoughts of the loss of the ponies were uppermost in the minds of all. Bug Eye, used to Western ways, did not press Mr. Manley as to his plan of action. He knew the cattle owner would prefer to keep whatever opinions he had until he reached the X Bar X and could get his men together. Bug Eye, belonging to another outfit, could have no concern in the matter until

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Mr. Manley asked for his help, at which time the cowboy would lend willing aid. Such is the code of the West.

Ethel, wedged in between Nell and Mr. Manley, stole a glance at Teddy as the boy braced himself upon the edge of the car door, his shoulders hunched, his body swaying with the motion of the machine, his eyes staring moodily out at the dust-covered bushes at the side of the road. She noticed how hard and brown was the hand that clenched the top of the door. The mouth, widened into a happy grin when she had first seen it, was now drooped at the corners. The bronzed forehead, below the sombrero, was drawn into a frown.

Ethel nudged Nell with her elbow.

"Doesn't it seem quiet out here, after the city?" she murmured, with another glance at Teddy.

The boy looked at her quickly.

"You mean us, I guess," he said, grinning slightly. "We haven't been very polite, have we? But, you see, it kind of hurts to lose a pony you've had for so long. I—"

"Of course, I know just how you feel!" Ethel burst out impulsively. "It's a shame! You just go after those—those rustlers, and get your horses back!"

"We will," Teddy answered grimly. "At least, we'll do our best. But there's no use crying over spilt milk."

"That's the way I feel about it, son," Mr. Manley said quietly. "We'll do all we can to get the brones back! When we're ready, I want you and Roy to come along with me. As soon as we reach home we'll get other ponies and be on our way." He pulled the ends of his mustache and settled down once more into silence.

Teddy knew this mood of his father. He had seen it twice before, once, years ago, when a puncher had knocked Roy down, and once when a cowboy, with a misshapen idea of humor, had coaxed Teddy upon the back of the worst horse on the ranch, a real "man-eater." On each of these occasions certain things had happened which directly affected the person in error.

When the car reached Bitter Cliff lookout, Bug Eye slowed down and stopped for a moment.

"Look there!" he said laconically, waving his arm in a wide gesture.

Nell leaned forward, then uttered a slight exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Roy asked, smiling.

"It's so—so close and high!" the girl answered, with a motion of her hands. "Why, it almost seems as though I could reach out and touch the chimney of that house away off there!"

"You try it," Teddy said, with a chuckle. "That's six miles away! Those buildings are

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on the X Bar X ranch—our place. Over to the west, where you see that other corral, is the 8 X 8, where you're going."

"Bug Eye," Mr. Manley said gently, "if it's all the same to you, we'd better get goin'."

"Right!" Bug Eye answered. He advanced the gasoline control and the flivver again shot forward.

The moment they reached the ranch yard of the X Bar X, Mr. Manley leaped from the car. A cowboy, who was leaning against the corral fence, craned his neck forward in surprise. The boss riding in an auto!

"Nick," Mr. Manley called sharply to the puncher, "our broncs have been rustled. We're goin' out after 'em! You and Gus Tripp get your ponies an' three others for Roy an' Teddy an' me. Bring your guns." Short, terse sentences. Mr. Manley was no longer a cattle owner. He was a cowboy, whose pony had been stolen.

"Right!" Nick Looker answered. He disappeared around the corner of the bunk-house.

As Mr. Manley walked rapidly towards the ranch house, he called back over his shoulder:

"Nell an' Ethel, we all expect you over for a visit. Excuse me runnin' away like this. Teddy, fetch in my bag."

"Dad means business," Roy said in a low voice. "Having General stolen has hit him pretty hard. There's mother."

A woman's figure appeared on the porch of the house, and in a moment she was enfolded in Mr. Manley's arms. Mrs. Manley's eyes widened in surprise when she saw the auto and missed the horses; and Mr. Manley explained briefly what had occurred. Questions were trembling on her lips, but she did not delay her husband with them. Mr. Manley kissed her again, and, turning, rushed into the house.

As Mrs. Manley walked toward the auto, Nell and Ethel could scarcely believe that this radiant young-looking woman was the mother of two big boys.

"Welcome to the West," she said, with a smile, as she extended a hand to each of the girls. "Mr. Manley has told me who you are. This is Ethel, isn't it? And Nell?" Ethel instantly noticed how much, in a curious way, both Roy and Teddy resembled her. Teddy had her blonde hair and blue eyes. Roy had her sensitive, fine mouth.

Belle Ada, the sister of Roy and Teddy, now came out of the house and toward the car, evidently having been told by Mr. Manley that there were visitors. As she was introduced, she mentally decided that she liked Nell and Ethel. That was like Belle Ada—impulsive and eager to make friends.

"I'm afraid we'll have to go now," Nell said, after a few moments' conversation. "Uncle Peter will be waiting for us."

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"But you will come over and visit me?" Belle Ada asked, her dark eyes on the two girls.

"Of course we will!" Ethel answered. "As soon as we can!"

Teddy seized his father's bag from the rear of the auto, and he and Teddy shook hands with the girls. Bug Eye jammed down the pedal. The car leaped forward. As it swung about, the girls leaned out and waved farewells.

"Pretty nice!" Roy said, as he watched the car being swallowed up in a cloud of dust. "Pretty nice!"

Mrs. Manley smiled. Then, remembering what her husband had told her on the porch, the smile left her face.

"Boys, you go in and speak to your father," she said. "He wants to tell you something. Belle and I will walk around to the garden and wait until you come out. You—you will be careful if you ride with him after those rustlers, won't you?" Her eyes held an anxious light.

"Don't worry, Mom!" Teddy cried, kissing his mother affectionately. "We'll be all right. There's no danger!"

The two boys walked stiffly toward the house.

"Wonder what it is?" Teddy mused. "You know, I have a hunch that dad found out more from those fellows down at the corral in Eagles than he told."

"Maybe," came from Roy. "We'll soon know."

They met their father coming out of the front door. His "city clothes" had been changed for a pair of leather chaps and a flannel shirt, open at the neck. Across one arm he carried a rifle.

"Want us, Dad?" Roy asked.

"Yes. Before we start, I want to tell you something. Teddy, you remember Gilly Froud, don't you?"

"I do," Teddy remarked in a low voice. His eyes flashed.

"Well, when I talked with those men down by the station, one of them said he saw a man with a scar on his face leading our brons. Did Froud have a scar on his face?"

"He sure did," Teddy answered excitedly. "On the left side."

Mr. Manley thought for a moment. Then he said:

"I kind o' thought that's how it was. Boys, we have a clue! We may get those brons back after all! Come on, let's go! Nick! Where in thunder is Nick? Bring those ponies around!"

CHAPTER V

RIMOR'S PLACE

IN response to this call, Nick Looker soon appeared astride a horse and leading another. Mr. Manley hurried forward.

"Where's Gus?" he asked.

"Comin', boss. He's bringin' two more bronses."

"Yell to him to hurry up. We've delayed too much as it is."

Nick Looker turned in his saddle and let out a shout.

"Gus! Bring them ponies here, fast!" Another puncher came riding up. He led two horses, fully saddled. Suddenly, from behind the house, came the sound of an excited voice.

"Hey, wait a minute! Hey, boss! Wait!"

"It's Pop," Teddy said. "Knew he'd show up before long."

A cowboy was running toward them. His wide hat was held in his hand, disclosing a head almost without hair. His face was lined with wrinkles. He wore a blue denim shirt. Wide trousers flapped grotesquely about a pair of

bowed legs. As he ran he waved both arms, windmill fashion.

"Wait a second, boss!" he called again. "I just heard about it! Snakes! The fust time the old X Bar X brand has been stolen! Me, I'm comin' with you, ain't I, boss? Ain't I?" He reached Mr. Manley, breathing hard.

"Yes, Pop, you can come," Mr. Manley answered. "Wondered how long you'd be reachin' here. Git your pinto an' come on."

Pop Burns clapped his hat on his head, and made for the corral, to return in a moment upon his horse.

"All right, men!" he exclaimed. "After 'em! Snakes! No rustler kin steal any X Bar X brand an' get away with it!"

Mr. Manley turned from the old wrangler to Roy.

"Son," he said slowly, "get your rifle. Bring Teddy's out, too. Hurry up!"

The boy ran up the steps and into the building. Mr. Manley handed his own gun to Teddy.

"Hold this," he ordered. "I'm going to say good-bye to your mother."

He made for the side of the house where Mrs. Manley and Belle Ada were waiting in the garden. When he returned his face wore a grim look. The time for action had come.

Roy had brought the rifles, and he, Mr. Manley, and Teddy vaulted into the saddle.

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The others, Pop, Nick, and Gus Tripp, were already mounted.

The news of the theft had gone the rounds of the ranch like wildfire. Every puncher on the place, except those riding herd, were watching from the top rail of the corral fence. Even Sing Lung, the cook, deserted his kitchen and came to the door of the mess-house, carrying in his hand a huge spoon.

Mr. Manley gave a yell. Spurs raked the sides of the steeds. There was the sound of hoofs on the hard earth. The six horses swung into action. Down toward the road swept the riders. Past the corral, the punchers astride the top rail yelling encouragement. Past the mess-house, Sing Lung waving his spoon wildly and shouting Chinese in a fluent stream. Out of the yard and into the road leading to Eagles. A cloud of dust arose. The chase was on.

"Take it easy for a while, boys," Mr. Manley advised, as he pulled his horse down to a slower pace. "There's some things I want to tell you. First of all, I want to say this. I see you all have got rifles along. Well, don't do any promiscuous shootin'. We want to get those hosses back, but we don't want any more trouble than we can help. Savvy?"

"We get you, boss," Gus Tripp drawled. "No fireworks! Just clean up this job, hey?"

"Right!" Mr. Manley tugged at one end of his mustache. "Now there's something

else. I reckon you all don't know much about this rustlin'. Here's how it happened."

He told, as briefly as possible, how the horses had been stolen.

"When I talked to the punchers down by the railroad corral, I got an idea," he continued. "You remember Gilly Froud, don't you?" Short nods came in answer. "Well, Froud had a scar on the left side of his face. So did one of the men who stole our brones, accordin' to the fellers I talked to. That mean anything?" he questioned.

"Sure does, boss!" Pop Burns exclaimed excitedly. "Proves what I been thinkin' all along. This Froud is a rustler! I knowed that as soon as I saw him tryin' to carve out an X Bar X from a hunk of wood one day down by the river. Came upon him sudden like, an' he tried to hide the wood on me. But I seen it. Seen the X Bar X brand, too."

"Did, hey?" Mr. Manley asked in an interested tone. "You never told me that. But let it go. We know who to look for now. Golly, she's sure some dusty!"

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy murmured, wiping his brow.

The excitement of the first dash had somewhat worn off, and they rode along now with a show of quiet determination.

Mr. Manley and Roy were in the lead. Their horses took on that long, easy gait that carries

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a cowboy comfortably over thirty miles of prairie in a day. No one knew just how long this chase would last.

Gus Tripp urged his mount closer to Mr. Manley's.

"Say, boss," he drawled, "I suppose you heard about the 8 X 8 bein' visited?"

"A little, Gus," Mr. Manley answered. "Man on the train told me. Do they know who the rustlers were?"

"Well, they got kind of an idee. There's been other ranches missin' stock in just the same way that the 8 X 8 lost theirs. They say the same gang does all the jobs."

"They do, hey?" Mr. Manley considered. "I wonder—" He started, then stopped. Whatever was in his mind he kept to himself.

"Dad, are you figuring on stopping at Eagles?" Teddy called. "Maybe we can find out something more from one or two of the men there."

"Don't think so, son," his father answered. "There's a certain crowd that hangs out in Eagles that I don't particularly hanker for. I guess you know who I mean."

"There's one bird I'd like to see again," Teddy remarked slowly. "The puncher who was outside Rimor's. He needs a lesson in politeness."

Mr. Manley nodded.

"We may meet him again. Seemed to me he

knew more than he wanted to tell. Still, he might have been just plain ugly. You can't accuse a man of bein' a rustler because he won't answer questions."

"Did some buckaroo answer you short?" Pop wanted to know, pushing his hat farther back on his head. "Who was it?"

"Don't know," Teddy replied. "He was leaning against Rimor's Place when the brons were stolen. He must have seen them, sure! When we asked him about them, he— Well, never mind what he did. But he didn't tell us."

"Have on a checkered shirt?" Pop asked. "An' no vest?"

"Yes," Teddy replied in a surprised tone. "How'd you know, Pop?"

"I seen him," was the brief answer. "He's been stayin' at Rimor's. Friend of Gilly Froud's."

"He is?" Roy exclaimed excitedly. "Hear that, Dad?"

"I heard," Mr. Manley said briefly. "I had an idea I'd seen him before. He rode out to the X Bar X one day and asked for Froud. When I told him Froud was ridin' cattle, he cut back for town. Yes, I remember, now."

As they rode along, each man kept a sharp lookout for anything that might indicate which way the rustlers had gone. There was not much chance of finding a clue until they reached

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Eagles, yet they could not afford to let any trace, no matter how slight, slip by unnoticed.

They saw no sign of the thieves, however, and when the six riders swung into Eagles, Mr. Manley had a determined look on his face. He had been talking to Roy and Teddy about the puncher in the checkered shirt. Deciding to locate the man if he could and to find out just how much the puncher knew of the taking of the horses, Mr. Manley stopped in front of Rimor's.

"Goin' in, boss?" Nick asked, a surprised look on his face. The boss was not the type of man to frequent a place like Rimor's. All the men on the X Bar X knew he never took a drop of liquor.

"Yes, I'm goin' in, Nick," Mr. Manley answered, his face set in stern lines. "There's a buckner in here that I want to talk to. I guess you all know who I mean."

Nick nodded. Mr. Manley had told them of the cowboy in the checkered shirt.

"Want any company, boss?" Gus Tripp drawled. "Just say the word, an' we'll come a-runnin'!"

"No, thanks," the cattle owner replied. "Teddy, hang on to this rifle for me. Don't want to look like a stick-up artist when I go in the door. Roy, just grab this bronc's rein, will you?"

Mr. Manley slid from the saddle.

"Sure you don't want me to come with you, Dad?" Teddy asked, a bit wistfully.

"I know what you're thinkin' of," his father answered, as he looked up at his son. "But you'd better stay out here until I get what I want. If I need help, you'll know it!" he added meaningly.

He walked toward Rimor's, and, pushing open the door, entered.

"Hope dad doesn't get into any trouble," Roy said, a frown upon his face. "I've heard of some funny things that happened in Rimor's."

"Now don't you go worryin' about your dad," Pop Burns advised, squinting his eyes at the door through which Mr. Manley had disappeared. "He can take care of himself. There's plenty in this town that 'ud like to see the boss in trouble, 'cause he wouldn't agree to loadin' them cattle scales at the corral over there. They wanted to put lead weights on the bottom of the scale so the Durhams would weigh 'bout half again what they really did. Your dad wouldn't have nothin' to do with the scheme." Pop removed his hat and thwacked it in a dust-raising gesture across his leg. "But snakes! I never did see the buckaroo that could catch your dad sleepin'. He's safe enough."

Still the veteran puncher stared intently at the door of Rimor's. He knew of the "hombre

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in the checkered shirt." He knew him for a "bad-actin' buckler."

Nick and Gus were conversing in low tones as they sat on their restless horses. Teddy rode up and down in front of Rimor's Place. Roy was bending over his broncho's back, raising his left stirrup a trifle. It was hard to get used to another horse, after owning Star.

Pop Burns sat quietly in the saddle, facing the restaurant. A close observer could have seen that his revolver was loose in its holster, and the rifle he had removed from its case on the saddle was held lightly in his hands, ready for action.

Suddenly, from within the restaurant, came a cry of alarm. A moment's silence, and another cry of alarm rent the quiet air.

Like a flash Pop Burns slipped from his saddle.

"Come on, boys!" he yelled, making a dash for the door. "Inside! Fast! We gotta help the boss!"

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE HORSEMEN

WHEN Mr. Manley entered Rimor's he looked sharply about him. After the bright sunshine of the street, the subdued light in the restaurant, due to shaded windows, caused the cattleman to squint his eyes. He hitched up his belt, from which, in a holster, hung a heavy revolver, and walked forward.

A bar, ostensibly for the serving of soft drinks, ran from the front of Rimor's place to the rear. To the right of this, on the other side of the room, were a number of tables, three with signs on them, "Reserved for Ladies." These tables were the excuse for the title "Restaurant."

An odor of staleness permeated the room. Flies buzzed lazily in the hot, close air. When the ranchman entered the only other person in the place was the bartender, an aproned figure with "New York" plainly written on his patent leather shoes and slick plastered-down hair. He sat on a chair in front of the bar, eagerly reading a week-old copy of a Manhattan paper.

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As the cattleman approached, the barkeeper raised his eyes from the paper and calmly surveyed Mr. Manley.

"Well, Manley, what can I do for you?" he asked in a surly voice. Bardwell Manley was no favorite with the Rimor outfit.

"You might do a whole lot," Mr. Manley replied slowly. "Then, again, you might not. You know a puncher who hangs around here with a checkered shirt?"

"Do I know a puncher who hangs around here with a checkered shirt?" the barkeeper repeated. "Well, now, I can't say that I do. There's plenty of punchers that come in here, but I never knew one yet that hung around with a checkered shirt. Sure it's the puncher, and not a collar that you're lookin' for?"

Mr. Manley flushed beneath his tan, but he held himself in check.

"I guess you know right enough what I mean," he said genially. "So you ain't seen him, hey?"

"No, I ain't," the man replied, with an accent of irony on the last word. He resumed his reading.

Mr. Manley stood for a moment looking down at the hunched figure before him. He tightened his jaw, and little knobs of muscles showed just below his ears. To those who knew Bardwell Manley, this was a sign not to be ignored.

"Mind if I take a look around?" the cattle-man said easily.

"Nope! Go as far as you like." The bar-keeper did not look up.

Mr. Manley walked toward the rear of the place. As he did so, a man stepped from a side door and confronted him. It was the cowboy in the checkered shirt.

"Lookin' for some one?" he asked.

"Was. Found him now," Mr. Manley answered shortly. "I want to talk to you. Do you know Gilly Froud?"

"Suppose I do?" the puncher answered insolently.

"This much. I think you know something about my broncs that were stolen from the hitchin' rail out there a while ago." Mr. Manley looked at the man keenly.

"Yea?" The puncher drew a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers from his shirt pocket. Deftly he rolled a cigarette and applied a match to it. "Well, suppose I do?" he asked, blowing out a cloud of smoke. His right hand slid inside his heavy shirt and toward his left armpit.

Mr. Manley saw the motion and his own hand flashed down to his side. Suddenly there was a wild yell behind him, and an empty bottle whizzed past his head. The barkeeper, seeing Mr. Manley going for his gun, had picked up the bottle and aimed for the ranchman's head.

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Swift as light Mr. Manley turned. His gun leaped from its holster, and he brought down the butt end on the barkeeper's wrist.

The rascal's right arm went limp. He uttered another yell and sank back in alarm.

At that moment the door burst open, and Pop, followed by Roy and Teddy, leaped into the room. The barkeeper bent to pick up a bottle with his left hand, but before he could reach it Roy kicked it into the corner and shoved his revolver into the man's ribs. Teddy, seeing that his father was uninjured, made a dash for the man in the checkered shirt.

But the lad was too late. The puncher, realizing the turn affairs had taken, disappeared through the side door, slamming it behind him. When Teddy reached it and flung it open, the man was gone. It would be useless, as well as foolhardy, to follow down that dark passageway upon which the door gave entrance. Best to hunt for the fellow outside the place, or to hope Gus and Nick, who had waited at the front of the restaurant, had seen and stopped him. Teddy turned back.

"You all right, Dad?" Roy and Teddy asked in almost the same breath.

"All right, boys," their father answered cheerfully. "He never touched me."

"What'll we do with this varmint, boss?" Pop asked, poking the barkeeper with the barrel of his gun.

"I cracked him one on the wrist," Mr. Manley said. "Guess we'll let him alone, Pop. He won't do no harm for a long while yet. Say, where'd that other hombre get to?"

"He ducked out," Teddy answered. "Went through a side door. I didn't chase him, because I didn't know where he'd gone. I thought maybe Nick or Gus would spot him."

"Maybe. I hope so. That buckner knows something about our ponies, or I'm a ring-tailed doodlebug. Pop, quit pokin' that geezer with your gun. Hey, you—" this to the "geezer" sharply, "better have that arm bandaged, or it'll go bad on you." This was characteristic of Bardwell Manley—solicitous even of a man who had tried to attack him from the back.

"Boss, we better get out of here," Pop declared. "If you want to hunt them brones, we ought to get goin'."

"As usual, Pop, your lips gives forth words of wisdom. We shall leave. Stranger, you tend to that arm of yours."

Mr. Manley, followed by Teddy, Roy, and Pop, made for the door. Outside, in the street, a crowd awaited them. That is, a crowd for Eagles—population one hundred and fifty in a rush season. Three cowboys, one woman, and five children stood staring curiously at the four men as they emerged from Rimor's Place. Nick and Gus Tripp were prancing about on

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restless ponies, rifles held in readiness. As these two saw the four men, their faces cleared and Nick yelled:

“Everything O. K., boss?”

“Yes!” Mr. Manley answered. Then, as his eye roved over the small crowd in front of the restaurant, he added. “We were havin’ a little argument, that’s all. It’s all over now.”

The cowboys looked dubious at this explanation of the yelling, but the gathered people slowly drifted away. The boys remounted their ponies, which, like good Western horses, had stood quiet when the reins were thrown over their heads and left dangling.

Roy urged his animal over to Nick.

“Say, Nick,” he said in a low voice, “you and Gus didn’t see anything of a puncher in a checkered shirt busting out of Rimor’s, did you?”

“No, we didn’t, Roy,” Nick answered.

“He the bucker what was doin’ the yelling?” Gus asked casually. It would take a great deal to startle Gus out of his placid way. When he acted, he acted quickly. When he did nothing, to quote himself, he “did it just as slow as he knew how.” Gus was a product of New Mexico.

“He didn’t do any yelling,” Teddy answered. “That was done by the New York plug-ugly they’ve got in there for a barkeeper.

Dad taught him a few things about the use of a revolver."

"Kill him?" Gus drawled, as though he were asking the time of day.

"Certainly not!" Roy answered, startled. "He just clubbed him. Put his right arm out of commission by a crack from the butt of his gun."

Nick Looker nodded approvingly. Nick was young and fair-haired. He had not the assumed callousness of Gus. He knew, though, that beneath this pretended hardness, Gus had a heart as soft as a woman's.

"We'll be gettin' on," Mr. Manley said. He had heard Nick say he had not seen "checkered shirt," as Roy called the puncher, and he knew there would be no use in delaying further. They could get no information in Eagles.

The six swung down the main street and out of the town. They were riding directly away from the X Bar X and into a valley separating Bitter Cliff Mountain from its neighbor, Mica Mountain. Here the road lost its travel-worn appearance and dwindled into an uphill trail. Up this trail the six men rode.

Teddy and Roy were in the rear of the riders, about two hundred yards from the rest.

The trail turned now, and in a moment those ahead were out of sight of the two boys.

"Come on, let's get along," Roy said. "Dad's hitting a good gait, all right."

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Touching spurs to the ponies, Roy and Teddy galloped forward. They came to a fork in the trail, and here halted for a moment.

"This way," Teddy advised, with a gesture. "That other's only a little path. I rode over it just the other day."

Roy did not reply. He pulled his horse to a halt and stared up the left trail. Seeing him stop, his brother did likewise.

"What's the matter, Roy?" Teddy asked in a puzzled tone.

"Ahead there!" Roy exclaimed in a tense voice. "Those horses! See them?"

Teddy stared intently up the steep trail. Then he gave a yell.

"Our brones! Flash and Star and General, or I'm a Lottie Blue-bird! Who's ridin' 'em? Let's go get 'em!"

A quarter of a mile above them, three men on three horses turned and looked down the trail. For a moment they stood, watching Roy and Teddy dashing toward them. Then, without a word, they wheeled and disappeared around a bend.

CHAPTER VII

RATTLERS

MR. MANLEY and the others did not hear Teddy's yell. They were a good distance away and this, with the creaking of saddles, the beating of the horses' feet on the hard ground of the trail, and the talk of what had just happened in Rimor's Place, made it practically impossible for them to hear the boy's cry. Hence they continued up the other trail, confident that Roy and Teddy were riding behind them.

As the two boys dashed up the left fork, Teddy found himself wishing, with a certain bitterness, that he had not given that yell. Flash was just ahead. If Teddy had contained himself, it might have been possible for him and Roy to have taken by surprise whoever was riding the horses. Then he would have gotten Flash back. But now there was only one thing to do—that was to ride! Ride after the rustlers with all the skill and energy the two boys possessed.

There was no time for talk. Both boys bent

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low in their saddles and with expert hands guided the ponies up the treacherous, winding trail. The only sounds were the breathing of the broncos and the monotonous drubbing of their feet on the ground. Now and then a pony would toss his head, and flecks of foam would fly backward. Desperately the boys urged the horses on. General, Flash, and Star were just ahead! They *must* catch them!

Roy groaned aloud when he thought of the sting of the quirt across Star's flank and the raking of the spurs as the rider above roweled the pony in an effort to escape. Roy could almost see Star trembling in surprised fright at this cruelty, his eyes misted with reproachful agony. It would be the first time in his life he had ever been beaten. Yet he would know it was not Roy on his back. He would know it was a stranger who was sending those stabs of pain through his body.

Roy clenched his teeth in a fury of determination. Up, up—to the right of that rock there—now to the left—the path turned here—up—up—harder—faster!

For a short space in front of them the trail lay open. Teddy shouted something unintelligible, and Roy whipped his head around. Teddy was motioning furiously, and, as Roy followed his brother's gesture, he saw General and his rider, who were in the rear of the other

two rustlers, leap off the trail and through the brush.

“Mark that spot!” Teddy panted. “We turn there!”

Roy sought to fasten his gaze on the place at the side of the path. That bush,—that brown bush—he must keep his eyes on it! If they lost it, Star would be lost too!

It is not easy to rivet one’s attention on a spot on the road while guiding one’s pony up a tortuous mountain trail. Roy’s mount, free of the hand which seemed to lift him over those leg-wrenching holes, faltered, stumbled, and, like a deer stricken with a hunter’s bullet, crashed headlong to the ground.

Automatically, Roy’s whole body relaxed as he flew through the air, so that the shock would be distributed equally throughout his frame. When he hit, his breath was jarred from him, but no bones were broken.

Teddy almost pulled his pony over backward in his effort to stop. He leaped swiftly from his horse and ran to his brother’s side.

“Roy! Roy!” he cried. “Are you hurt? Are you all right? Roy!”

“All right, Teddy,” Roy gasped weakly, struggling to his feet. “Just a—a—fall. Wind’s gone.” He bent over for a moment, gasping for breath. When he straightened up, the lines of pain had disappeared from his face.

“Pretty lucky! Where’s that bronc? If his

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leg's broken—" Then he saw his pony standing in the underbrush, unhurt, but trembling violently. Quickly he ran toward the steed and patted him gently.

"Snap into it, Teddy! We won't give up yet! There's still a chance! We've got to find Star and Flash! And if we can bring back General for dad—"

Without finishing his sentence, Roy vaulted into the saddle, and once more the boys galloped up the mountain trail. Roy's fall was but an incident in the chase.

When they came to the spot where they thought the thieves had turned off, Roy pulled his horse to a halt.

"Think this is it?" he asked Teddy.

"I think so," answered his brother. "We'll take it—have to! Come on!"

As Teddy headed his horse off the trail and into the bush, he had a queer feeling that this was all a vivid dream—that he and Roy had been riding like this forever, on and on, mile after mile, over mountains and through valleys. Chasing—what was it they were chasing? Oh, yes! Flash! And Star and General! Why, of course. What was the matter with him? He shook his head savagely. Was he a tenderfoot that a ride like this should do him up? Why, he—around that fallen tree, you brone you! Not over it! Suddenly swift realization came to Teddy. No wonder he felt

weak! Here it was late afternoon, and he had not had anything to eat since breakfast!

"Feel all right, Roy?" he yelled, turning in his saddle.

"Yes—pretty good! Kind of hungry!"

"Me, too!"

The comparative safety of the trail had given way to a heavy tangle of underbrush which made the riding extremely dangerous. Still, the boys had for consolation the fact that it was as bad for the rustlers as it was for them.

Gradually it came to Roy that the chase was hopeless unless they could tell which way the thieves had gone. He motioned to Teddy to stop, and the two boys listened intently. There was no sound of cracking twigs, no noise of distant crashing of horses' feet through the forest. All was silent.

"Seems like we've lost them," Roy said, a note of despair in his voice.

Teddy settled deeper in his saddle and blew out his breath in a long sigh. The world seemed especially dark at that moment. After that long, hard ride, with success almost in their grasp, to have failed now! The boy took off his hat and ran his fingers through his damp hair, then let his arm drop heavily down to his side in a gesture of despondency.

"It's tough luck!" he said in a dull voice. "Pretty tough luck! We almost had 'em!"

"If I hadn't fallen we might have caught

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'em," Roy declared regretfully. "I could kick myself! Pulling a stunt like that!"

"Aw, it wasn't your fault," Teddy said in rough sympathy. He tried to cover up the memory of how his heart had leaped into his throat when Roy crashed to the ground. Teddy looked over at his brother. Their eyes met. Then Roy knew how Teddy had felt while he, himself, was lying in the brush.

"Well, we can't do much here," Teddy said, moving uneasily in the saddle. "Let's go back. It's getting late."

"I'll tell a maverick it is! And I'm hungry. Besides, dad'll be worried. When we started up that left fork, I thought dad and the rest might hear us and follow. But I guess they were too far ahead. Well, the best thing we can do now is to find him and tell him what we saw. Maybe we'll be able to pick up the trail of our lost brones when we get back on the path."

Looking up at the sun to make sure of their direction, the boys rode slowly back toward the path. After the excitement of the pursuit, the reaction had set in, and both felt low in spirits. The fact that they had had no dinner contributed not a little to their depression.

The horses, heads held low, picked their way through the brush. They, too, were tired and thirsty.

For a long time neither of the boys spoke.

At length Teddy licked his lips and remarked:

"I'm mighty dry, Roy. Seems to me there's a spring around here somewhere. Remember it?"

"Sort of. Not just sure where it is, though. I'll—"

He stopped. To his ears came a peculiar buzzing, like the sound of some giant locust.

The horses heard it at the same instant, and they swerved about and would have bolted but for the firm hands of their riders. Teddy peered sharply down at a large gray boulder that lay half imbedded in the soil, a deep, wide gash running from one end of it to the other.

Again came the buzzing noise, and now a strange, pungent odor floated out, which told, plainer than words, what that sound meant.

"Rattlers!" Teddy cried. "Sidewinders! A whole den of 'em!"

"Kill 'em!" Roy yelled, drawing his rifle from its case on the saddle. "Kill 'em! Pour lead into the varmints! Salivate 'em!"

He leveled his rifle, and, as he did so, a veritable horde of writhing, slimy, scaly creatures issued forth from the rocky crevice, like a phalanx of some horrible, crawling army!

CHAPTER VIII

THE FALL

THE woods echoed with the crack of the rifles as Roy and Teddy opened fire on the rattlesnakes. The horses were prancing about in a frenzy of fear, and it was almost impossible to take accurate aim, but there were so many of the hissing creatures that this was not necessary. The ground near the rock seemed literally covered with the snakes, and a shot placed anywhere among them was nearly sure to hit one.

“Blow their heads off!” Teddy was yelling. “Pulverize ’em!”

The boy had an intense hatred of rattlesnakes, like most Westerners, and considered it a good deed to kill as many as possible.

The rifles were spitting lead as fast as the boys could pump bullets into the chambers and pull the triggers. The earth in front of them was beginning to resemble a butcher’s block. Torn bodies of the snakes were everywhere.

“Don’t seem to know when they’ve had enough!” came from Teddy as he pressed an-

other clip into the rifle. "Golly, there must be a million of 'em!"

The angry buzz of the reptiles increased in intensity as more and more of the serpents issued forth from the cleft rock. The horses were whinnying in terror, and it needed all the skill the boys possessed to keep them from bolting. And, indeed, the sight of the deadly, wicked-looking, triangular heads of the snakes was a terrifying spectacle.

"There's one less of 'em!" Roy cried, as he cut a large diamond-back in half with a bullet.

"Atta boy!" Teddy answered. "If this bronc of mine would hold still for a minute, I could get that big one near that tree!"

Roy looked to where his brother indicated and saw a huge snake lying coiled with his head drawn back ready to strike. The boy raised his rifle and took careful aim. Then a strange thing happened.

Almost more swiftly than the eye could follow, the snake uncoiled and glided toward Roy's horse. But, suddenly, it stopped, raised its head, and for a moment stood perfectly still, directly in front of the two boys. The sound of rattling stopped as a radio that has been turned off. In surprise, Roy held his hand and did not take advantage of the splendid target offered, it seemed purposely, by the snake.

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Teddy, however, was held in no such trance. Before him was a snake. It was his duty to kill it. The boy raised the rifle to his shoulder and squinted along the barrel. By almost a miracle, the horse remained quiet.

Roy watched the scene in a detached way, almost as though he was part of an audience of a staged drama. It was the moment of breathless suspense before the crisis.

But this sense of unreality did not last long, for the silence was shattered by the crack of Teddy's gun. Roy looked down at the spot where the snake had stopped, expecting to see it a mangled mass of blood and skin. To his surprise, he saw the snake still in that up-raised, immobile position, as firm and steady as a rock. Teddy had missed!

He had no opportunity to correct this mistake. The huge serpent sounded his rattles just once. Then he swiftly lowered his head to the ground, as though bowing farewell, and, like a streak of light, was gone. And where, before, the ground had been alive with the forms of writhing diamond-backs, there remained only the torn bodies of those the boys had killed. The other snakes had gone with their leader.

Teddy glanced at his brother, a sheepish look on his face.

"I missed him, clean!" he said, sliding the rifle back into its case on the saddle. "Roy, I

would have bet anything that I drew a perfect bead in his head. I had him lined up just right when I squeezed the trigger. I can't understand it," and Teddy shook his head.

"You missed, all right," Roy answered, as though to himself. "He was the king snake of that whole bunch! Wasn't he a whopper, though? Never saw such a big one! The way he stood there, with his head raised looking right into your rifle barrel, he seemed like—like—Ajax defying the lightning. You know, Teddy, I'm kind of glad you did miss."

"Well, you soft-hearted bronco-peeler!" Teddy laughed. "Glad because I didn't kill a sidewinder! Wait till dad hears about that! And, speaking of dad, we'd better get back to him. He doesn't know where we are, and he may worry. Let's go!"

"I only wish I hadn't fallen," Roy remarked in a low voice as they rode along. "I'll bet we would have had our brones back now."

"Aw, forget it," his brother declared. "It wasn't your fault. Anyway, they were a good bit ahead, and we might not have caught them, even if you hadn't fallen. And when we did, we'd have had a fight on our hands, I'm thinking. Not that I'd mind it," he added quickly. "But if we got punctured, mother and dad would worry like all get-out!" It hardly entered the boy's mind that he might have been

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killed if he and Roy had succeeded in forcing the rustlers to the wall.

"Where in thunder is that spring?" Roy asked in a petulant voice. "Baby, I'm some dry! Next time I go chasing rustlers, I'll bring along a canteen, I'll tell a maverick!"

Teddy did not reply. He was thinking that perhaps they would not get another chance to go after the rustlers. Certainly the men ahead were moving fast. Star, General, and Flash had more stamina than any other three horses he had ever seen. This meant that, in a pinch, the thieves could ride them well out of the county before night.

"Now you take that puncher in the checkered shirt," Roy went on, talking more to himself than to Teddy. "He's a queer proposition. When dad was knocking politeness into that barkeeper to keep him from doing any plugging, old Checkered Shirt could have had things to his own liking. Instead, he runs. Afraid, most likely." Roy bent lower in the saddle to avoid a tree branch which overhung the trail. "Pop said he was a friend of Gilly Froud's."

"I don't care if he's a friend of Black Mike, the Killer!" Teddy burst out. "If he flicks a cigarette in my face again I'll salivate him!"

Roy looked quickly at his brother. He knew the strain the younger boy had been under, and felt that the best thing to do was

to take his mind off Flash and Checkered Shirt.

"Say, Teddy," he said in a loud voice, "what do you think of those two girls dad met on the train?"

Teddy glanced over and grinned.

"Think I need a little cheering up, Roy?" he asked. "Well, maybe I do. Now what was that you wanted to know?"

"Say-y-y-y, you can't get away with that!" Roy laughed. "You heard me all right!"

"Oh, yes—the girls! Why, I think they're very nice."

"Very nice!" Roy mimicked. "You don't say! My boy," and his voice took on a paternal note, "I admire your restraint. But then, of course, you know more girls than I do. To me—to me, they were as the breath of spring-time!"

"Aw, dry up!" Teddy exclaimed sheepishly. "Stop that kidding! You liked 'em as well as I did. Jimminy, I'm thirsty!"

"Seems to me that spring is around here some place," Roy declared, pulling his horse up suddenly.

"Let's separate, and see if we can find it," suggested Teddy. "I'll go down the mountain a way, and you go up. If you find it, yell, and I'll do the same if I locate it. If we miss it, we can meet here in ten minutes."

Roy nodded his approval of the plan. He turned his steed to the right, and started up

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the incline at an angle. Teddy watched him for a moment, and then, licking his dry lips, faced in the opposite direction. Chirping to his pony, he took a firm grip on the reins and started the descent.

Riding down an incline is never as easy as riding up. Teddy realized this, and he guided the pony slowly down Mica Mountain. As he rode, he turned his head from side to side, seeking for the spring. The boy was getting more thirsty every moment.

He came to a spot which seemed more treacherous than the rest. The footing was of loose stone and very steep. Teddy seriously debated whether it would not be better to dismount and lead the pony.

Fate, in the guise of a hornet, decided the problem for him. As the hornet thrust his poisoned lance into the pony's flank, the horse gave a snort of pain and leaped forward. Teddy made a grab for the saddle horn, missed, and went flying through the air. He landed face downward on a bed of knife-like stones, and, as the horse regained his balance and trotted off, Teddy, with a wild yell, went sliding down the mountainside!

CHAPTER IX

FACING A MOUNTAIN LION

As Teddy Manley rolled and tumbled down the incline, sudden stabs of searing, burning pain shot through his body. There was one thought paramount in his mind—that he must stop himself soon or be dashed to death on the rocks below. His fingers sought to grasp some solid object, that he might cling to it; but with a sob the boy realized that there was nothing here to seize except loose stones which mocked his efforts by falling upon him in an avalanche.

The thought came to him that perhaps this was the end—that he had escaped all the other dangers of life, only to be killed, ignominiously, so it seemed to him, by a fall down a mountain side. Strangely enough, he could look at this picture with clear imagination, even while his arms were pressing vainly the earth as he shot downward. Never, it seemed, had he been able to think so clearly. Flash, his pony, where was he now? Teddy hoped whoever had him would treat him well. He deserved it. Flash was a good bronc. None better. If only Roy

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hadn't— That small tree just below—reach out and grab it—hold on—hold on—

With a breath-taking jolt, Teddy hit the tree and clutched desperately at its slim trunk. For a second that seemed an eternity, he clung there, hoping. Then a sharp crack, the tree gave way, and Teddy slid down, down—

Below him a ledge of rock stuck its ugly lip out into space. Nice drop, that—must be thirty feet. Those gray things at the bottom must be boulders. Which one would he hit? Ah—h—

For one terrible moment Teddy hung on the edge. Then a swift drop—and night closed about him with velvet wings.

How long he had lain there unconscious, Teddy never learned. He opened his eyes upon a sky ripped and torn by red lightning flashes. Idly he lay on his back, staring upward at the unusual spectacle of a thunder storm without thunder or rain, and with red lightning instead of white. Queer, that! He'd have to tell Roy about it. Where was Roy, by the way? He'd enjoy this. He always did like sunsets and such things. Poetry, too! Funny fellow. Reading books of verses! Like mom, maybe. She used to be a school teacher. Denver, or some place like that. Jimminy, look at that streak of fire! All the way across the sky! Watch for the next one, now. Why, was the storm over? Certainly there were no more lightning flashes.

Seemed to be clearing up. Wow, what a headache!

With a supreme effort that caused a wave of pain that almost overpowered him, Teddy struggled to a sitting position. He looked around him in a puzzled manner, trying hard to adjust his mind to the scene about him. The sky was as blue as it always was, and there was no sign of a storm. The red flashes had disappeared. In the west, the sun, a huge ball of fire, was casting a radiance on the forest below. It was nearly evening.

Teddy shook his head to clear it, then pressed his hand to his lips to keep back a cry of agony. He must not give in. But, for a moment, the boy fell back upon the rock, breathing hard.

When he raised himself again the searing sensations at the back of his head had turned to dull, aching pain. Gingerly, the boy moved first one leg, and then the other. They seemed all right. Neither of his arms was broken. Taking a deep breath, Teddy determined to stand. It was easy—just bend one leg under him, lean on his elbow, and push upward. Then his head would have to come along, no matter how much it wanted to lie quietly on the cool rocks. Now—one, two, three! He was up!

Wondering how long his legs would support him, Teddy leaned weakly against a wall of rock. Steady, now! He'd have to figure this

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thing out. Here he was in a prison of rock. On three sides there arose the bare, hard granite. The front of this rocky cubical was open, and Teddy staggered to the edge and looked over. Below him yawned a sheer drop of two or three hundred feet. Now the question was, how in thunder did he get here?

He had fallen, that was one sure thing. No doubt about that, Teddy thought, as he looked ruefully at his torn clothes and bruised and bleeding hands. But how did he get so sliced up? A fall would never have done that. The fall could have caused that cut on his head, but not these rents in his clothes. Why, he looked as though he'd been put through a meat-chopper.

If his head would stop whirling for a moment he might be able to figure this out! Think, now. Thirsty—yes, he was thirsty. Awfully thirsty. He must find some water. A spring. A spring! Why, he was looking for a spring! That's what happened! He and Roy were thirsty, so they separated, trying to find that spring! Then that slide!

A shudder passed over Teddy's body. Memory returned with a rush, and with it came desperate realization. He was trapped here, alone, and he had no way to tell Roy and the others where he was! Suppose they never found him? Suppose the horse he had fallen from wandered far off and misled the others in

their search? Teddy gave a shiver. Then he straightened up. Have to cut that out. He had been in worse fixes than this, and he always had gotten out all right. He would this time, too. Dad and Roy would surely find him. If he only had some water! He was burning up.

He put his hand to his head and brought it away covered with a dark, sticky substance. Blood! No wonder it ached so. He'd have to find some water and bathe it.

Over to the right was some sort of a depression in the rock. Perhaps there was water there! Hope surging high within him, the ranch boy staggered toward the spot and, with a cry of joy, flung himself face downward beside a pool of sparkling water. He buried his face in it, and drank in great gulps.

The point of saturation being reached, Teddy stopped, and, tearing a piece from his shirt, soaked it in the water and bathed his head. The coolness felt wonderfully soothing, and, much refreshed, the boy arose and considered matters. The situation seemed not half so desperate as it had been before he had found the spring.

True, night was approaching and the pangs of hunger were becoming more severe.

"Yet if one has water, one can go for a number of days without food," the boy murmured. "And I feel sure that help will come before long."

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Up to this point the boy had refrained from calling, both from a feeling of weakness and the thought that it would do little good. Now, however, he raised his head and sent a yell echoing up into the stillness. He waited tensely for an answer. None came, and, after a moment, he shouted again. But his head was beginning to whirl, and he was compelled to sit down for a moment.

"Can't afford to do much of that," he said grimly to himself.

A thought came to him, and he drew his revolver, which, luckily, was still in the holster at his side. He pointed it aloft and was about to pull the trigger when he hesitated. Then, with a gesture of despair, he shoved the gun back into the holster. He could not waste the ammunition. If night caught him here, it was probable that he would need all his bullets for defense against the animals which might seek out that spring. They would not wantonly attack him, he knew, but if they thought he was trying to keep them from water, they might attempt to make an onset on him. The animals were all of the cat family, but Teddy had seen some huge mountain lions in that section. They could easily kill a defenseless man if they were so minded.

Feeling much stronger now, Teddy proceeded thoroughly to investigate his "prison." If there were a means of escape, it would be well

to find it before night settled, otherwise he would have to wait until morning. He could take no chances on climbing up a cliff in the dark, especially in his weakened condition.

First he threw himself on his face at the edge of the cliff and peered down. That way was closed to him—the rock was as smooth as a shingled roof and it would be worse than folly to attempt a descent. There was but one thing left—to climb up, if he could, and regain the ledge from which he had fallen.

At first glance, this seemed as hopeless as it would be to climb down. But Teddy, born and reared in this country, knew that though often these crags appear insurmountable they are not really so, for by clinging to the vines which grow on them and getting a foothold in small depressions worn by the action of the elements, one can sometimes reach the top. Certainly, it was dangerous. Yet, Teddy thought, he had just fallen from the very height he wished to conquer. And, with a grim smile, he murmured:

“What’s one fall more or less between friends?”

Taking another long drink from the spring, Teddy began his tour of inspection. The red of the sky had deepened to orange, and the boy knew that at the most, he had but an hour of daylight left. If he were going to make the attempt, now was the time.

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Tightening his belt, the boy walked over to the rocky wall. Here the vines seemed heaviest, and Teddy experimented by seizing one of the creepers and resting his weight on it. There was a crackling of wood as it pulled away from the side of the cliff, but it held, and Teddy determined to take the chance.

He was just about to draw himself up when a noise behind him caused him to hesitate. He did not immediately look around, for he was held in that sort of helpless panic one feels when he realizes there is something behind which one dreads to face. Hands upraised, clutching the vine, Teddy stood motionless. But he must look behind him. He had that queer feeling that he was not alone—that some one or something was standing on the rocky floor, watching him.

Suddenly, desperately, he jerked his head around. Then his face blanched. Not ten feet from him, tail lashing angrily, was one of the largest mountain lions he had ever seen!

CHAPTER X

SEARCHING

WHEN Roy Manley turned his horse up the mountain, he determined to find that spring, and find it quick. Haste was imperative, for Mr. Manley and the others had no means of knowing where he and Teddy were. They might conclude the two boys had taken the left trail, but certainly if Roy and Teddy did not join them soon, there would be cause for worry. Chasing rustlers is not a pastime, it is dangerous work.

Roy realized the state of mind his father would be in, and just touched the spurs to the pony's side. Looking at the sun, the boy decided that it must be nearly four o'clock.

Roy ran his hand over the pony's flank.

"Not sweating much, are you?" he said. "Guess you need water, all right. Chances are you haven't had any since early this morning."

He halted the horse and peered closely at the ground.

"Seems softer here. Hold still now, brone, and I'll look."

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He threw the reins over the pony's neck and dismounted. Leading the horse, he made for a small clump of bushes.

"Sure looks like there ought to be a spring around here," he declared. "I sort of remember this place. I'll bet this is where Teddy and I stopped last year on our way to Molten to look at those cattle dad was thinking of buying."

Parting the bushes, he gazed within the space they enclosed.

"Yay, boy! Water! Go to it, old fellow! Easy now. Don't bust your boiler."

Removing his hat, he scooped himself up a drink. He then stood watching the pony drink the cool water. When the animal was satisfied, which was not until he had again dipped his nose into the spring, the boy patted him affectionately.

"Some good, I'll tell a maverick!" Roy exclaimed, with a sigh of satisfaction as he wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "Come on now, bronc! We have got to tell Teddy!"

He replaced his hat, mounted, and again started down the mountain toward the place he had agreed to meet his brother. Arriving there, he cupped his hands to his mouth and let out a yell.

"Yay-y-y-y, Teddy! Yay-y-y!"

He paused for an answer, but none came. Again he called.

“Yo-o-o-o, Ted! Come here! I found it!”

He strained his ears for a reply, but the echo of his cry was the only answer.

“That’s funny,” he said, straightening in the saddle. A perplexed frown came to his face. “Teddy oughtn’t to be out of earshot. He said ten minutes, and it’s easily that, and more!”

Rising in his stirrups, Roy peered through the trees.

“I’m going to ride after him,” he declared after a further period of waiting. “I don’t like this a little bit! When Teddy says ten minutes, he means just that, and no longer. It’s a cinch he wouldn’t delay when he knows we’ve got to get back to dad in a hurry.”

He was just about to guide his horse down the mountain when the sound of men’s voices caused him to turn swiftly in his saddle. An idea came to him that these might be the rustlers, so he jumped his horse off the trail and into the bushes at the side. The next moment he gave a yell and swung the pony back on the path. Riding toward him were his father, Nick Looker, Pop Burns, and Gus Tripp.

“Roy!” Mr. Manley called. He spurred his bronco forward. “Where’ve you been, son? We’ve been worried about you!”

“It’s a long story,” Roy answered, forcing

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his mount toward his father, adding: "Say, have you seen Teddy?"

"Teddy? Why, no! I thought he was with you."

"He was, up to half an hour ago. Then we separated, trying to find a spring. He hasn't come back yet."

A look of alarm shadowed Mr. Manley's face. He turned to the others.

"You didn't see Teddy, did you, anybody?" he asked.

"Not me, boss," Nick Looker answered. "We've been with you all the time except when Pop and I fell behind, a ways back."

"I ain't seen him," Gus declared. "Pop, ain't neither, I know. Have you, Pop?"

"Nope! Snakes! You don't mean to tell me he's lost? I can't believe that. Teddy wouldn't get lost in these hills. He knows 'em like a book."

"I don't think he's lost, either," Roy said in a troubled tone. "I don't know what to think. He and I caught sight of the rustlers on our broncs, Dad, and—"

"You saw the galoots?" Pop burst out excitedly. "Where, Roy? How long ago? Let's go after 'em! Snakes!"

"Go easy," Gus drawled. "Let Roy tell it. Go ahead, Roy."

Roy "went ahead" and told his story, ending with the words:

"I haven't seen Teddy since. That's all!"

"That's a-plenty," Mr. Manley declared. "Where do you suppose Teddy went, Roy? Oughtn't he to be back by now?"

"He should," Roy replied. "As I told you, he said ten minutes. Golly, I don't know where he is, Dad! I'm worried. Something must have happened to him."

"You don't *know* that," Nick Looker broke in. "Don't cross no bridges till you come to 'em. Teddy's all right!"

"I hope so," Mr. Manley replied moodily. "But I never knew Teddy to stay away when he said he'd be back unless he couldn't come. Well, let's not waste time here. We must find him."

"Want to spread out, boss?" Pop asked. "Better that way, hey?"

"Right!" Mr. Manley answered shortly. "Roy, you come with me. Pop, you and Gus ride to the left. Nick can take the right. Roy and I will go straight down."

The men and the boy started on their search. Mr. Manley and Roy took the very same path over which Teddy had traveled, though, of course, they did not know this.

"Mighty funny where he could have gone," Roy remarked. "Jimminy! I hope nothing happened to him. But it sure looks queer!"

"Take Nick's advice," his father answered. "Teddy may be riding around looking for us."

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But Roy stole a quick glance at his father's face and saw the lines of worry.

The ranchman knew what it meant to be lost in these hills with night coming on. Then there was the added danger that Teddy had met the horse-thieves. If one of them was really Gilly Froud, Mr. Manley had visions of Teddy riding straight at him and pulling him off Flash. Somehow, Mr. Manley knew that Froud would be riding Flash if, indeed, he was one of the rustlers.

The rancher thought of the other two thieves as leveling their guns at Teddy. Drawing his hand across his forehead in a quick gesture, the ranchman forced his horse on.

Suddenly Roy gave a cry. He pointed to something ahead.

"There's Teddy's horse!" he exclaimed. "That's Teddy's horse, Dad! But he isn't on him! Ted must be around here somewhere! Hey-y-y Teddy! Yo-o-o!"

Father and son strained their ears for an answer. Silence! Then, echoing among the hills like the single beat of a taut drum, came the sound of a shot. With startled eyes the two looked at each other.

CHAPTER XI

THE RETURN

TEDDY MANLEY'S breath caught in his throat as he stood, his back to the wall, arms outstretched, watching the mountain lion. The only thing moving on that rocky plateau was the animal's tail. While the lion remained as firm and steady as a statue, its tail lashed back and forth with grim significance. It seemed to Teddy that he could not take his eyes off that waving tip.

Then from the lion's throat came a low growl, like the first mutter of distant thunder, telling of a coming storm. With the sound, Teddy's brain threw off the shackles of fear. Swift as thought, the boy's hand flashed down to the gun at his side. The blue barrel came out and up in a draw that would have left old Pop Burns gaping in envious amazement.

At the same instant the boy bent low and jumped to one side, holding his gun before him, finger ready on the trigger. But the lion did not spring. Instead, it whirled with the boy, and instantly was again facing him, this time

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at a greater distance, Teddy having backed away, once he was clear of the wall.

Thoughts were flashing through the boy's brain like subtitles on a moving picture screen. Should he shoot and risk having the animal charge if he missed? Would it be better to wait and see if the lion would depart of its own accord? Perhaps the brute was frightened. Given time, it might turn tail and make off without attacking. Still, where had it come from? If it had leaped down from above, Teddy would surely have heard it. Why, it must have been here when Teddy had fallen!

Still backing, the boy determined to let the lion decide the issue. If it made off, very well. If it sprang—Teddy took in a bit more of the trigger slack and raised the barrel just a trifle, so that it pointed directly at the lion's left eye. At least he would go under, fighting.

Suddenly the tail stopped its restless lashing. Teddy saw the shoulder muscles of the beast move like ropes in silken sheathes. He knew the moment had come.

As the lion sprang, Teddy fired. In that small enclosure the roar of the large automatic was deafening.

When the lion landed, not five feet from Teddy, it turned its head and began biting savagely at its left flank. Teddy's bullet had only wounded the animal.

He fired again and jumped aside. The bullet

hit the beast just below the heart. Furious with pain, it whirled about and came at the boy.

Now a hot, almost unreasoning, rage took possession of Teddy.

"Come on, come on, you yellow coward!" he shouted wildly. "Fight! Don't lay down so soon! Fight, you sneak!"

Teddy's abstinence from food, his chase after the thieves, and the fall down the mountainside had snapped his restraint. He knew nothing, except that he was facing an enemy—something he must kill. With an abandonment of fury, he fired his remaining shots in the direction of the lion, threw his gun from him, and started forward, fists clenched, eyes burning with a feverish light.

"Now, you coward, we're even!" he yelled. "Fight, if you're not too ornery. Let's see what you're made of! Come on! Think I'm afraid, hey? I'll show you! You yellow coward."

The strange spectacle of an unarmed boy advancing toward him with something white wrapped around his head and making furious noises with his mouth, caused the lion to hesitate. But only for a moment. Then he leaped forward to meet this presumptuous being, and teach him respect for tearing claws and knife-like teeth.

Teddy braced himself for the shock. There

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was no thought of death in his mind—only that he would soon be at grips with an enemy whom he hated.

Through a red mist, the boy saw the roaring beast launch itself into the air. He saw the lips drawn back in a snarl of rage. He saw the forefeet close together, white, curving claws projecting from small rubber-like pads. He saw the eyes gleam wickedly.

Teddy put up his hands to ward off that hurtling body, and at that moment two sharp cracks came to his ears. He saw the lion's body twitch. Automatically he dodged, and the beast struck his shoulder, dashing the boy to the ground. There was another crack, then another. Teddy rose dazedly to his feet. He looked down. On the rocky floor lay the lion—quivering, but stone dead.

From above there came a cry.

"We got him, Dad! Yay, Teddy! Are you all right? Teddy!"

Putting his hand to his head, the boy glanced up. What he saw caused quick tears of emotion to come to his eyes. Staring down at him, their faces alight with eagerness, stood his father and Roy.

"Dad! Roy!" Teddy cried weakly. He staggered to the wall and leaned against it. There was a lump in his throat that choked him, and try as he did, he could not keep the tears from starting to his eyes. This would

never do. What would they think of him? He shook his head savagely and sunk his teeth into his lower lip. There, that helped! He looked up again.

"You sure timed your entrance," he called, grinning bravely. "Quite a show!"

"Teddy, are you all right?" Mr. Manley shouted.

"Sure! Come on down. The water's fine." His head was spinning around, and the red rim of the sun was stretched into a long line of fire across the sky. To his surprise, the boy suddenly found himself sitting down. He laughed at the absurdity of this change, but it was a weak laugh.

Above him, Roy and Mr. Manley had seen the boy sway back and forth for a moment, then fall to the ground. Swiftly Mr. Manley ran back to where his pony was standing and detached a rope which hung from the saddle horn. He tied one end around a tree, and dangling the other end over the edge, he slid down, careless of the blistering burns the strands inflicted on the palms of his hands. The moment he hit bottom he ran to his son.

"Teddy! Teddy boy!" he stammered. "That was a close one! If Roy and I had missed—" He hunched down and threw one arm about his son's shoulders. Even Mr. Manley's eyes were not quite dry. He had just seen his son escape from a horrible death.

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"All right, Dad. I'm O. K. now," Teddy said, resting one hand over his father's as it lay on his shoulder. "I'll give you and Roy the prize for marksmanship. You sure clipped the beast good!"

"Hey, Dad, I'm coming down!" Roy yelled from above. "Is Teddy hurt?"

"No!" Mr. Manley answered. "He's not! You stay up there, Roy. Wait for the rest! Yell at 'em!"

"I can get up now," Teddy declared. To prove it he struggled to his feet, and promptly sat down again.

"Golly, my legs are made of India-rubber!" he said, grinning. "What do you know about that, Dad? Funny, hey?"

"Sure," Mr. Manley assented, smiling broadly now. He knew from the change in Teddy's voice that the boy was gaining control of his nerves and would soon be himself again. "Just take it easy, son. Here!" he ran to the spring and dipped his hat in the water. "Drink this. Slow!"

Teddy obeyed, and the merry-go-round on which the trees were riding came gradually to a stop.

The boy got to his feet again, and this time he stayed there.

"Where's my friend?" he asked, looking about. "Ah, there she is. A beauty, hey, Dad?" he touched the dead mountain lion with

his foot. "Look at that hide! Say, do you think we can get her up out of here and cart her along home?"

"Don't see why not," his father answered. "Golly, boy, do you know you went for this lion with your bare hands? Went right at her!"

"Did I?" Teddy said indifferently. He kicked the carcass again. "Must have been a little crazy, I guess. I didn't know what it was all about for a while."

He walked over toward the spring. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

"Well, for the love of Pete! Dad! Take a look at this! No wonder the old lady wanted to fight. Can you beat this?"

Mr. Manley hurried to his son's side and bent over. In a scooped-out hollow of the wall, partly screened by bushes, he saw two little, yellow kittens.

"Baby lions!" the ranch owner cried. "Say, Teddy, we've got to save 'em! We shot their mother, and now it's up to us to help the babies make a start in the world. We can—"

"Hey-y-y, Dad!" came from above. "Here are Pop and Gus and Nick! Want me to come down?"

"No! You boys get ready to haul up!" Mr. Manley answered. "Teddy," he added, in a lower voice, "I want you to let them pull you up. Oh, yes, I know you can climb it," he

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said, interrupting his son's protest. "But, just for fun, let 'em pull you. They need the exercise."

He fastened the rope below Teddy's armpits and yelled to those above to hoist away. Up Teddy went. In a moment he was safe upon the ledge. Then came Mr. Manley's turn, and with two, tawny, squirming kittens held against his chest he made the ascent as Teddy had done.

The last rays of the sun were sending a shower of gold over the mountains as Roy's hand clasped Teddy's in a firm grip, that told, louder than any words, what was in the heart of each. The two boys were together again. Teddy had been saved from what had seemed certain death.

It was too late to look further for the horse thieves, and Mr. Manley gave the word to start for home. Evening was upon them, and as the two brothers rode along through the gathering dusk, side by side, talking in low tones, each had a small, warm kitten cuddled on his saddle.

CHAPTER XII

VISITORS

"NICK, why'n thunder don't you give that mouth-organ of yours to Sing Lung an' let him make soup out of it?" Gus Tripp drawled.

The cowboys, Roy and Teddy among them, were sprawled in lazy attitudes just outside the bunk-house. Several days had passed since they had ridden after the horse thieves—days of fruitless searching for the lost animals.

Nick finished the last, plaintive strains of "Home, Sweet, Home," and removed the instrument from his lips. Noon mess had just been concluded, and the men were resting a few moments before resuming the work of the ranch.

"Huh?" Nick grunted. "What was that, Gus?"

"I say you ought to give that wind-wailer to Sing Lung to make soup out of."

"Yea?" Nick tapped the harmonica gently on the palm of his hand. "Maybe you figger the noise you make drinkin' soup would turn into music then, hey?"

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"Chalk up one for Nick," Teddy grinned. Except for a small cut on his head, the boy had completely recovered from his dangerous fall.

"Notice you been practicin' up quite a bit lately," Jim Casey put in. "Norine say she likes to hear you play, Nick?" he questioned. Norine was Mrs. Moore's daughter, Mrs. Moore being a widow who for five years had been the cook and housekeeper at the ranch house.

"That's all right," Nick returned. "Roy, tell us what Jim had on the other night when he went callin' over to the house. Go on, tell the assembled multitude!"

"A boiled shirt," Roy answered, with a smile. "At first I didn't believe it was Jim, but when I went closer I heard him sing, and then I knew it was him."

"There you are!" Nick arose and spread his arms in a wide gesture. "The gentleman goes callin' in a boiled shirt, an' singin'! Could anything be sweeter?"

"Yes! Crackers an' milk!" Pop Burns exclaimed. "But not much sweeter. Tell you, I don't know what this younger generation is comin' to. Nick learns to blow tunes on a hunk o' tin. Jim sports a boiled shirt. Gus—I don't know what Gus does. I ain't ketched him yet. An' all because a silly girl knows how to make goo-goo eyes!"

"She ain't a silly girl!" Explosions of indignation burst about Pop's ears.

"She's nice, let me tell you!"

"You bet she is! Silly girl! Huh!"

"She's the purtiest girl I ever see!"

"How'd you used to go callin' on a girl, you old bronco-peeler? With a six-gun hangin' from yore belt an' a bowie knife between yore teeth?"

"Yes!" Pop shouted, above the din. "I sure would! In my day we went courtin' in hats, not hair tonic!"

"I suppose that's why you got so much hair now!" Gus yelled, doubling up with exaggerated laughter. "Boy, that dome of yours shines like a Mexican dollar!"

Pop clamped his hat savagely back on his head, and then grinned.

"Well, I suppose boys will be boys. Scuse me now. I got to work. There's some blocks behind the cook-house you children can amuse yourselves with. You can build houses. But don't build 'em too high. They might fall on you an' bust a finger nail or somethin'. Then Norine wouldn't like you no more!" Before they could answer him, the veteran puncher tramped off.

"Crazy old coot!" Nat Raymond said with a grin. "Always has the last word! Well, let's get goin', boys. There's plenty to do. Roy, you're the boss this week, ain't you?"

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Want me to ride down to Eagles and see if our inoculation stuff has come in yet?" He had reference to an antitoxin which cattle are given to prevent a disease called blackleg.

"Guess you'd better, Nat," Roy said. "And while you're there, take a good look around. See if you can spot that puncher in a shirt that— isn't striped."

"I get you," Nat returned. "An' if I see a geezer with a scar on the left side of his face I'll let you know that, too." Mr. Manley had told the story of the robbery to all the men on the X Bar X.

Roy and Teddy walked slowly over toward the corral.

"How does the old head feel, Teddy?" Roy asked.

"Pretty good. Aches a little now and then. But I'd rather have a headache than an obituary notice. Roy, if you and dad hadn't gotten there when you did, I'd have had to be swept up with a shovel." A slight shudder passed over the boy.

"Forget it," Roy advised, laying a hand on his brother's shoulder. "It's over now. Say, I've been thinking. I—"

"So have I," Teddy interrupted. "About Flash, mostly. I miss him, Roy. Miss him like anything! If I ever catch the thief who took him—"

"I know," and Roy nodded. "I feel the

same about Star, and I guess dad does about General, too. But we can't do any good thinking about it. When the time comes, we'll act. The boys say that the gang who rustled the cattle from the 8 X 8 is around again, and I've still got a hunch those are the waddies who stole our bronses. We just have to sit tight, Teddy, and do a little figuring. In the meantime, I've got an idea that might interest you."

"Let's hear it," Teddy suggested. "Not about the bronses, is it?"

"No," Roy answered. "It's about those two girls over at Pete Ball's place. Remember—Nell and Ethel?"

"Well, now that you speak about it, I do," Teddy drawled, with an assumption of carelessness. "Why?"

"Nothing, except that they're coming over here."

"They are?" Teddy looked up with quick eagerness, then, as quickly, turned away his head. "Well, that'll be nice for you, Roy."

"You don't say!" his brother laughed. "Nice for me, will it? How about you?"

"Oh, I guess I can stand it. How long can they stay?"

"I notice you didn't ask when they're going home, did you?" Roy asked. "'How long can they stay!' Teddy, my boy, your innocence is sublime. Well, mother telephoned to Mrs. Ball this morning, and I guess they'll be here

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to-night or early to-morrow. Bug Eye will probably bring them over."

The two boys had reached the corral, and Roy paused for a moment, leaning against the rails. He peered at the horses within. Somehow, the place did not seem the same without Star trotting over to muzzle his hand.

"You mentioned something about rustlers at the 8 X 8," Teddy remarked, as he examined the initials cut in one of the rails.

"Yes. Dad heard from Eagles that they might be the same thieves who stole Flash, Star, and General. Don't know who told him, but I imagine it was one of the men who saw them ride our ponies away. You know; the gang that hangs around the corral in town. Some of them are pretty decent, and they'd help us if they could. There's only a certain bunch that's got it in for dad because he wouldn't go in for that scheme of weighting the cattle scales, as Pop told us."

Teddy nodded.

"I remember! I'll bet Checkered Shirt is one of them, too. Well, let's get to work. You and I are going to ride fence, aren't we? Might as well get started. The better shape we keep the fence in, the harder it will be for the rustlers to nab any of the X Bar X stock, if they're planning to do that. Golly, what's this country coming to? They claim the old West is gone, but if some of those birds who

say that would come here, they'd soon find out! But we can do without rustlers, if we have to, I guess."

"I'll tell a maverick we can!" Roy declared forcibly. "If they're part of the old West, let 'em go. I won't keep 'em. Come on, grab a bronc and let's be on our way."

It was almost dark when the two boys returned from their work of repairing the fence. As they dismounted and led the horses to the watering trough, a familiar noise greeted their ears. It was the rattle of a flivver, above which sounded a voice.

"Made it, ladies! Got this tin bronco ridin' right along, didn't I? Whoa! Grab a-holt, ladies, we're goin' to land, an' there's no tellin' what she'll do when she hits ground again! Yow! There she is. Ho-o-o-old up now, you snortin' peanut-roaster!"

"Bug Eye!" Roy exclaimed, with a grin, turning to his brother.

"And he's not alone, either!" Teddy remarked mischievously. "He was talking to 'ladies,' Roy! Did you get that?"

A girlish laugh punctuated Bug Eye's further description of the "peanut-roaster."

CHAPTER XIII

NORINE ENTERTAINS

LEAVING the horses to drink their fill at the watering trough, Roy and Teddy hurried over towards the car, which had come to a stop near the entrance to the ranch house.

"Howdy, boys!" Bug Eye called, as he alighted and opened the rear door. "The ladies was afraid I wouldn't get here before dark. But they needn't have worried. I can make any place before dark! I got you here O. K., didn't I?" he asked proudly, as he helped Nell and Ethel out of the auto.

"You certainly did!" Nell answered, with a laugh. "Hello, Roy and Teddy!"

"Hello, Nell!" Roy greeted.

"How are you, Ethel?" asked Teddy. "Have a good trip over?"

"Sounds as though we just landed from an ocean voyage!" Ethel laughed. "Yes, we had a fine trip, Teddy. Bug Eye is such a careful driver that—"

"*Careful*, ma'am?" Bug Eye interrupted, pushing his sombrero back and wiping the

perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Careful? I guess you ain't heard about the time—"

"Here it comes," Teddy remarked in an undertone.

"About the time I was sent over to Eagles by the boss to bring back a crate of eggs," Bug Eye went on imperturbably. "You see—nope, Roy, they didn't bring no bags except them two pocket-books in the rear; you can tote them in if you want. As I was sayin', the boss sent me down to Eagles to bring back a crate of eggs what was comin' in on the train. Now you know what a freight wrastler does to eggs. 'Handle with care' means 'Treat 'em rough' to baggage heavers.

"Well, as soon as I saw them eggs I knew what had happened. The yaller was drippin' down the sides of the crate an' there wasn't a whole egg in the lot. Thinks I, I'll cart the box home, anyway, an' show the boss. So I shoves her in the back of this here bus an' sets out for the 8 X 8. Well, sir, believe it or not, when I hit the ranch, every last one of them eggs was back in their shells, just as they were the day the hens laid 'em! *Careful!* Why—"

"Whoa, Bug Eye, you're going around a curve!" Teddy sang out. "Take it easy! You'll strain yourself! I guess the girls know by this time what a careful driver you are."

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"We do," Nell said laughingly. "We didn't even know we were riding!"

With a nod of approval at this remark, Bug Eye once more took his place behind the wheel, and with a shout of, "telephone if you need anything and I'll bring it over in the tin puddle-jumper," the puncher started with a rush back to the 8 X 8.

"He's quite a boy," Roy remarked as, carrying the girls' week-end bags, or "pocket-books," as Bug Eye called them, he led the way into the house. Teddy went to put the horses in the corral for the night.

"He surely is," Nell replied to Roy. "Tell me, Roy, did you ever get your horses back?" she went on, her face suddenly serious.

"Never did—yet," Roy answered. "We—Teddy and I—saw them being ridden, and we chased after them, but they got away."

"And that fresh man in the checkered shirt!" Ethel exclaimed. "Have you ever seen him again, Roy?"

"Once," was the grim answer. Hurriedly the boy opened the door and stood aside to let the girls pass in. "Oh, Mother!" he called. "Visitors!"

The sound of light footsteps descending the stairs was heard immediately, and in a moment Mrs. Manley appeared. She greeted the girls warmly and said that Belle Ada would be ready in a moment.

"Roy, turn on the lights, please, won't you?" his mother asked. He pushed a wall-button, and a soft glow immediately illuminated the room. Then, as Mrs. Manley saw the girls glance up in apparent surprise, she said, smiling a little: "Yes, we have electric lights—and everything. Mr. Ball has them, also, as you must have noticed. You see most of the ranchers around here have their own gasoline motors which generate the current. But take off your things, won't you? You are tired and dusty, so come upstairs. Belle is eager to see you."

Roy was hurrying to his own room to "slick up," as he called it, when Teddy burst into the house.

"I just wanted to—" he began. Then, seeing his brother was alone, he stopped in confusion.

"Go on, tell me," Roy jeered. "I make a fine audience. What was it now?"

"Nothing!" answered Teddy, his face a trifle red. "I—I forget what I was going to say. Where you bound for in such a rush?"

"Oh, I was just going to put on a clean shirt," Roy responded carelessly. "Have to dog-up a bit for supper."

"Uh-huh," Teddy grunted, with a grin. "For supper! Sure! Have to get dogged-up for supper. Guess I will, too." Then his face took on a more serious expression. "Say, Roy

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you don't think we'll have to stop looking for those thieves while the girls are here, do you?"

"I'll tell a maverick we won't!" Roy exploded. "Not if dad has anything to say about it, and I guess he has! He wants General back, and he wants him bad. If any clue turns up, we'll go right after the rustlers!"

The evening meal, with the two girls as guests, was a jolly one. Mr. Manley was at his best, and his chuckling remarks kept the company in a gale of laughter, though often he directed a sly remark toward Roy or Teddy, which caused them to change the subject hurriedly. Belle, following her father's leads, contributed not a little to the general hilarity.

When the meal ended they all strolled into the living room of the ranch, a large, well-lighted apartment with a huge oak table in the center, on which were piled books and magazines. A stone hearth was built into the wall, and a log fire was crackling away merrily, lighted, Mr. Manley hastened to explain, with a sly grin at his wife, "not for warmth but for effect." Above the fireplace, was the mounted head of a bison, set on a wooden panel.

"Oh, I think this is simply gorgeous!" Ethel murmured as she looked about her. "Belle, you don't know how lucky you are to be able to live in such a wonderful place!"

"Maybe she wishes she could live in New York," Teddy remarked, with a glance at his

sister. "Then she could go to parties and dances every night—if she had any one to take her."

"I wouldn't want to go to dances every night, Teddy Manley, and you know it!" Belle answered. "Even if I did have some one to take me," and she pouted in mock anger.

"There wouldn't be much difficulty about that," Nell declared, with a look at Belle's raven hair and lustrous, dark eyes.

"So you think my girl would be the Belle-Ada of the town, hey?" Mr. Manley laughed, as he ruffled his daughter's hair with an affectionate hand. "Well, maybe next year you can go to school in New York if you want to, daughter."

"And leave you and mother?" Belle asked with wide eyes. "No! Not me, Daddy!"

"Of course she forgets all about Ted and me," Roy said, grinning. "We just *live* here. Nell, what would you do with a sister like that?"

"Now don't tease," Mrs. Manley said, and smiled. "Bardwell, couldn't we have some sort of entertainment for the girls? Some of the cowboys play musical instruments. Don't you think they'd oblige us?"

"Nick Looker!" exclaimed Teddy and Roy in the same breath.

"What's Nick do? Play on the linoleum?" Mr. Manley asked, with a grin.

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"The mouth-organ, Dad," Teddy replied seriously. "What do you say? Shall we get him to perform? He'll do it, I know."

"How about getting Norine to dance that Irish jig of hers?" Roy suggested. "With Nick playing for her, she ought to be great!"

"Yea, if Nick doesn't get too bashful when he sees Norine," Teddy said. "But let's try it. Shall we, Mother?"

Hardly waiting for the assent he knew his mother would give, Teddy made for the front door.

"Belle," he called over his shoulder, "you go and talk to Norine! Tell her Nick loves to see her dance. Then she'll come. Roy, grab some of these chairs and cart 'em out on the porch. We can all sit there. We'll have a moonlight show!"

"Wait! We'll come with you!" Ethel declared, getting up. "Come on, Nell, we can help too. Where are you going, Teddy?"

"Going to root out Nick and the rest of 'em. Come along, both of you, if you want to. See what the ranch yard looks like in moonlight."

While Roy and Mr. Manley were bringing the chairs to the porch, Teddy led the way toward the bunk-house. In the light of the full moon the forms of the punchers dotting picturesquely the landscape near the door of the shack could be seen. As the two girls ap-

proached, plaintive wailings came to their ears.

“A handsome young cowboy was dy-ing,

(dy-ing)

And as on the prairie he lay—

(he lay—)

To the punchers who came round him sigh-ing,

(sigh-ing,)

These last dy-ing words he did say:

(he-e-e di-i-id say-y

-y

-y.)

“Take his forefoot from out of my back-bone,

(back-bone)

His back te-eeth from out of my brain,

(my brain)

His hindfoot from out of my liver

(liver)

And assemble the bronco agai-ai-ai-ai-ain!”

“Hey, you birds, close up that butcher-shop!” Teddy called out. “Don’t you keep union hours? Nick! Where’s Nick?”

“Right here, Teddy, right here,” one of the figures replied, separating himself from the group. “What’ll it be?”

“Feel in the mood for a little mouth-organ solo to-night, Nick?”

“Yep! Sure do! I just learnt a new piece. It’s an Irish dance, and—”

“Atta boy, Nick! Just what we want! Norine is going to jig for us.”

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"Oh, she is?" Ethel could see the young puncher hesitating. "Well, Teddy, if you'll wait just a second while I—"

"He wants to get dooked out!" came a voice which Teddy recognized as Pop's. "What'd I tell you?"

"Aw, dry up!" Nick growled playfully. "All right, Teddy, I'll be over in two minutes. Want the rest of these here pinto wrestlers?"

"Sure! Everybody!" Teddy answered. "Over to the front porch as soon as you're ready."

When Teddy and the two girls reached the house, they found that a row of chairs had been placed on one end of the porch. Norine was waiting, and, after being introduced to the girls, she shyly told them:

"I knew a boy once that came from New York. He had curly hair and finger nails that glistened just like Pop Burns' head. Oh, he was lovely! Did you know him, at all?"

Nell and Ethel confessed that they did not, by that description.

"But then we haven't seen Pop's head yet, so we can't just say."

Norine laughed merrily, and began a torrent of questions about New York that was only stopped by the arrival of Nick and his fellows.

"All set, boys?" Mr. Manley called out.

"All set, boss!" Nick repeated. "Is—er—Miss Norine—er—ready?"

"I am that, Nick!" was the answer. "An' when you blow into that pipe-organ, think of something else besides horses an' cows! Think of that moon up there, an' maybe you can make music!"

"He's not thinking of cows just at present," Roy remarked in a low voice to Nell. "See him watch Norine!"

Then Nick put his instrument to his lips and began to blow; slowly at first, then faster. Norine took up the dance.

Nick must have been thinking of the moon, for it was real music that came from that cheap mouth-organ. As the strains of "Rory O'More" floated out into the night air, the ranch house disappeared and, to the girl's mother, even the silvered prairie, and Norine was dancing upon the grassy heath of Ireland. Mrs. Moore stood in the doorway, a proud look in her eye, her head swaying from side to side, her foot gently tapping the doorsill. This was *her* girl that was dancing!

CHAPTER XIV

GUS COMES HOME

ROY and Teddy were showing the two girls around the X Bar X the next morning.

"Here is where the bronco-busters do their stuff," announced Teddy, when they came to the corral. "Rad Sell, who's out on the range just at present, is one of the best leatherstickers we've got on the place."

"Oh, Teddy, I wish we could see him tame a wild horse! Don't you, Nell?" Ethel asked, eyes wide with curiosity. "Of course we've seen it done many times in the moving pictures, but—"

Teddy laughed heartily.

"When Rad climbs aboard some of those fresh ponies, he doesn't stay in one place long enough to have a picture taken of him. How about it, Roy?"

"That's right," his brother agreed. "Remember the time he broke Tiger? First they tore around the corral like a cyclone. Then, all of a sudden, Tiger took a look at the fence, pulled back, and the next second he was over

and running wild for the mountains. That was before dad had this other rail put on. No horse in the world could jump it now."

"What happened then?" Nell inquired eagerly.

"Oh, nothing much," Roy said carelessly. "Rad had a long ride, and when he got back Tiger had turned into a lamb. He's one of the best saddle horses on the ranch now. You can ride him later, if you want to."

"No, thanks," Nell laughed. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind." She walked on a little way, and then said: "Look, here's a notice of some sort. What is it about?"

Tacked upon one of the rails of the corral was a piece of paper, written on in heavy, black letters. Teddy and Roy gazed at it curiously.

"Never saw it before," Teddy remarked in a puzzled tone. Then he came closer and read the words:

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS RE-
WARD FOR THE CAPTURE OF
THE THIEVES THAT STOLE
THREE BRONCOS BELONGING
TO THE X—X FROM THE HITCH-
ING RAIL AT EAGLES.

"That's mighty funny," Roy mused. "I wonder—"

"Lookin' at my sign?" exclaimed a voice

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behind them, and Mr. Manley, together with Belle, came toward the corral. "I put that up early this morning. Belle Ada suggested it. Don't know whether it'll help or not, but I'd give a lot more than that to get General back. What say, boys?"

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy declared. "So would Teddy and I be glad to get Star and Flash back. Think it'll encourage the boys, Dad?"

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Manley answered slowly. "I happened to hear Jim Casey and Gus Tripp talkin' about the theft, an' the way they feel they'd run themselves ragged to locate those rustlers. Pop would, too—he still sees red because the X Bar X brand was stolen. So I guess they'll do the best they can, without that reward being offered."

"Yes, but, Daddy, wouldn't it be nice to give something to the boys if they did catch the thieves?" Belle asked. "And then, too, I think they'd look just a *little bit* harder, if they knew they'd get a hundred dollars when they found the horses. Now, wouldn't they?"

"Mebby—mebby," Mr. Manley agreed. "Won't do any harm to try. Well, are the boys showin' you around the place?" he asked, turning to Nell.

"Yes, and it's perfectly thrilling!" Ethel broke in. "I'd just adore it if I could live here always."

"Have you shown them the kittens we brought back?" Mr. Manley inquired of Teddy, winking one eye.

"Not yet, Dad," his son returned. "We were just going over there when we saw this notice of yours."

"What kind of kittens?" Ethel wanted to know.

"You'll see!" Belle Ada exclaimed. "And I'll bet you never saw any like them in your life before! Come on—they're near the bunk-house."

The two city girls bent eagerly over the large, wire cage that stood in the shelter of the bunk-house wall. When they saw the soft, furry little creatures romping about inside, Nell gave a cry of delight and was about to reach down and pet them when Roy caught her hand.

"I wouldn't do that," the boy warned. "Their teeth and claws are growing pretty fast. You might get nipped."

"What kind of kittens are they?" Ethel wanted to know.

"Mountain lions," answered Mr. Manley. "Real mountain lions! We shot their mother, and we figgered we ought to give the youngsters a start in life. So we brought 'em over here."

"Aren't they cute?" came from Nell. "When they grow up, maybe you can tame them."

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"And maybe *not*," Teddy retorted grimly. "The only tame mountain lion I ever saw was a dead one. When these grow up they go to the circus, hey, Dad?"

"If they live," answered Mr. Manley.

"Now," said Roy, as he pushed the cage further out into the sun, "we'll show you our famous cook, Sing Lung. This way, ladies and gentlemen! This way for the big show!"

They strolled to the front of the mess-house, and Teddy stuck his head inside.

"Hey, Sing Lung!" he called. "Come here a minute, will you? You have visitors."

Sing Lung, his face wreathed in an expansive smile, shuffled forward.

"Hillo," he greeted them genially. "How you? Nice day?"

"Keep him talking a while," Teddy said in a low voice to Roy. "I'll get his fiddle."

"Sing Lung, this is Miss Carew, and this is Miss Willis. They are staying at the 8 X 8," explained Roy.

"Glad to see you." The cook smiled and extended his two clasped hands in the oriental welcome. "You velly pletty—almost pletty like Belle Ada," and he grinned widely. To his mind few girls had reached Belle's perfection of beauty.

"Thanks," Nell answered, blushing a little. It was a new experience to be complimented with a reservation in favor of another's beauty.

"Sing Lung, tell the ladies what you give the punchers for mess," Mr. Manley said, with a wink to the cook.

"Mice," Sing Lung declared, nodding his head. "Little white mice, velly tendle; bleck-fast, dinna, suppa! Yep! Me catchee! You like I makie you mice stew? Maybe mice flied?"

"Heavens, no!" Ethel said, with a shudder. "Mr. Manley, I think that's *terrible*! Do the men really *like* to eat mice?"

Belle and Roy could hold in no longer. They exploded into a hearty laugh. Nell and Ethel saw the joke immediately, and could not refrain from laughing too.

"I think you're mean to tease us," Ethel exclaimed, pouting in mock anger. "We are awfully green, aren't we? I might have known you were only fooling!"

"Never mind," Belle consoled the Eastern girls. "If you stay out here long enough, you'll be a real Westerner. Then you can go back to New York and ride a horse down Broadway."

At this moment Teddy returned with a black box.

"Here, Sing Lung," he said, thrusting it toward the Chinese cook. "Give us a tune, won't you? The girls have heard, all the way back in New York, what a player you are."

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"Me not so good," and the cook grinned modestly, eyeing the box enviously, however.

"Sure you are!" Roy declared. "You play, Sing Lung, and then we'll leave it to the girls. Hey?"

"Oh, please, Sing Lung!" coaxed Belle Ada.

"Well—" the cook hesitated, but it was plain to be seen that he was more than willing to oblige. Teddy at last settled the question by forcing the box into the cook's hands.

With a look of almost reverence on his face, Sing Lung opened the box—and, as he did so, there sprang from it a mouse!

With a yell, the cook dropped the case and dashed into the mess-house, from which there immediately issued an explosion of high-fire Cantonese. The two girls, who had looked at the little rodent with simple curiosity and with none of the fright which members of the feminine sex are supposed to exhibit on such occasions, laughed merrily at the strange spectacle of a Chinese running from a mouse.

"He's scared to death of mice," Roy said, a wide grin on his face. "When I heard him talking about serving them to the punchers, I thought I'd try a little kidding myself. He's got a trap back there that he catches the mice in, so I took one out and put it in his fiddle-box."

"Poor old Sing Lung! I don't think much of your joke!" declared Belle Ada.

"You'd better tell him the danger's over, or he'll go through the roof," Mr. Manley declared, with a chuckle. "Teddy, you go in and bring him out, will you? Say Roy chased the mouse away."

While the others—all but Belle Ada—looked on in amusement, Teddy braved the storm of cyclonic, oriental language and entered the cook house.

"All right, Sing Lung," they heard him say. "Mouse gone. You can come down now." Then, in an aside to the others: "Golly, he's crawled onto a shelf and curled up!"

Reverting to English for a moment, the cook screamed:

"All lite! All lite! You say all lite when little lat he inside my fi'il? I no clazy! All lite! Ha! Maybe you puttee little lat in fi'il, hey?"

"It wasn't a rat, it was a mouse, Sing Lung, and it's gone now. So come on down."

"You say so—yes?"

"Yes, I say so. Come on down."

The cook descended cautiously to the floor and looked about him. Finding that the mouse was not in sight, he blew on his finger tips and, with a grin on his face, went to the door.

"She's gone, I guess," he said calmly, "Me no like 'um. Poison! Now, you, li'l Belle, you hand me fi'il; yes?"

"He knows if you give it to him, there won't

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be any mice in it," Mr. Manley laughed. "Go ahead, Belle Ada, give it to him."

With a smile, Belle picked up the case, and, taking the queer-looking instrument out, she handed the two-stringed Chinese fiddle to Sing Lung. He took it gingerly, and, after receiving the bow, got ready to play.

"Now you'll hear some real laundry music," Roy said in a low voice to Nell. "Don't laugh. Make believe you like it," he warned.

Sing Lung slowly drew the bow across the strings. He evoked a peculiar, wailing noise, more akin to a sick cat on the back fence than to anything else to which the girls had ever listened, so they said later.

There was a sudden interruption. The sound of a rapidly approaching horse was heard, and all looked up in surprise. Gus Tripp was riding toward them, his steed in a lather.

As he came closer Mr. Manley noticed that Gus slumped oddly in his saddle. At the sight the cattle owner ran quickly forward. Gus held up his right arm in a mute gesture.

From his fingers blood was dripping!

CHAPTER XV

PLANNING A DANCE

"Gus!" exclaimed Mr. Manley. "What happened?" Teddy and Roy looked anxiously at the rider.

"Had a little accident, boss," Gus replied, a wry smile on his somewhat pale face. "Mebby if you an' I was to take a little walk—"

Mr. Manley nodded quickly, understandingly, and turned to the girls.

"Belle Ada," he said swiftly, "suppose you show Nell an' Ethel the garden? I know they'd like to see it."

Sensing the reason behind her father's suggestion, Belle led the way toward the side of the ranch house. Gus turned in his saddle and watched the three girls depart. When they were out of sight and hearing, he took a long breath, swayed in the saddle, then gritted his teeth and straightened up. Roy walked over to him and, reaching up, seized him around the waist and practically lifted him from his horse.

"Let's see that wound, Gus," Mr. Manley

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demanded. His teeth set grimly in his lower lip, the puncher thrust the injured arm forward.

The cattle owner took hold of it gently and bent over it. Then he gave a cry.

"It's a gunshot wound! You've been plugged, Gus!"

"Cor-rect." Gus turned his head wearily. "Teddy, I wonder if you'd cut this here sleeve off me? You see it's kind o' stuck, an' when I pull it—"

"Sure, Gus!" the boy answered with a note of pity in his voice. "Have it off in a jiffy."

Opening his jackknife, Teddy slit the sleeve loose just below the armpit. As gently as he could, he peeled the cloth away from the wound. Gus winced, but uttered never a word until the sleeve was off. Then he heaved a sigh and said laconically:

"Thanks, Teddy! Feels better now. Much obliged."

Sing Lung, who stood watching the scene with wide eyes, now scurried into the cook-house and returned in a moment with a stool.

"Gus," he said, "you sittee down. Feel bettah. I gettee you dlink!" Entering the kitchen once more, the Chinese came back with a cup of water. Gus drank it gratefully.

"You're fine cook, Sing Lung," the injured man drawled, handing the cup back. The sun-tanned red had returned to his cheeks, but Mr.

Manley noticed that there was just a bit too much color there now.

"Yep, a fine cook," Gus repeated, as though to himself. "A fine cook! Only—you can't bake *bread*."

"Here, Gus," Roy said in a loud voice, "snap out of that! Does your arm hurt much? What happened?"

"What—this?" Gus held up the arm and examined it as if it belonged to another man. "Naw, she don't hurt. Feels kind of funny, that's all. Well, I'll tell you what happened." Taking another deep breath, the cowboy regained control of himself with an obvious effort and went on:

"You know I went down to Eagles for the mail." Mr. Manley turned to Sing Lung and said something in a low voice. The cook disappeared, to return in a moment with a white shirt. While Gus talked, Mr. Manley was using strips of this as a bandage to stop the bleeding.

"For the mail," Gus repeated. "When I reached town I tied my bronc up an' stopped for a second outside Rimor's Place, thinkin' of Checkered Shirt. But I thought there was no use in goin' in there to look, 'cause, even if I did find him, I didn't have nothin' on him. So I started for the post-office." He hesitated, while Mr. Manley wound the improvised bandage tightly about the arm. "Well," he continued, "just then Rimor's door swung open

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and a puncher came out. He took a quick look at me, turned around, an' ducked back again. Boss, that's plenty tight! Where was I? Yea—he ran in again.

“Thinks I, I’ve seen that buckeroo some place before. Then it hits me like a load of bricks. It was Gilly Froud!”

Teddy and Roy started back. Mr. Manley looked up into the eyes of the injured man.

“Go ahead, Gus,” the cattle owner said tensely. “What else?”

“Well, I couldn’t let a chance like that slip by, so I made a jump for the door an’ followed. The second I got inside, I seen my mistake. Froud was leanin’ against the bar, gun out, starin’ my way. We had a few words about them stolen horses, an’ all of a sudden before I could make a move he blazed at me an’ put my arm out of commish. I couldn’t do nothin’ then, crippled like that, except let out a few of my opinions about Froud, but he only laughed an’ tole me to bring my army next time. So I hopped back on Axlegrease an’ come home. Here’s yore mail.”

Reaching inside his shirt, Gus drew out several letters. He made as though to hand them to Mr. Manley. Suddenly his body went limp. His head dropped forward, and the envelopes fell from his nerveless fingers. Roy leaped forward just in time to keep the cowboy from pitching off the stool to the ground.

"The nervy fellow!" Teddy said slowly, looking first at the letters and then at the still form of Gus. "Gets shot, goes to the post-office for the mail, an' rides twelve miles back home with his arm still bleeding!" The boy looked at the unconscious man with open admiration. Then, bending swiftly down, he seized the puncher's shoulders. "Where'll we take him?" he asked of his father. "In here?" motioning toward the cook-house.

"No, better take him to the house," Mr. Manley suggested, looking at Gus closely. "He's out, cold! No wonder! Ridin' twelve miles under that sun with a hole ripped in his arm! He sure is a nervy boy!"

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy exploded. "Come on, Teddy, we'll lift him over to the house. Sing Lung, you run ahead and tell mother to get a bed ready. And talk English, not Chinese."

"Me fixee! Me fixee!" Sing Lung chattered, setting out on a run.

With Teddy at his shoulders and Roy at his feet, Gus was soon being carried toward the ranch house. Mr. Manley walked alongside, holding the injured arm so that it should not hang down.

Gus was soon resting quietly in a bed upstairs. Teddy telephoned for the doctor, but Mrs. Manley took no chances of blood poisoning setting in while waiting for the physician.

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She dressed the arm herself, with swift, sure fingers. Later, when the medical man arrived, he declared that no professional nurse could have done a better job.

Leaving the cowboy resting quietly, Mr. Manley and his two sons walked toward the corral.

"There's one thing sure," the rancher declared, "and this is that Froud is the one who stole our broncs! And another thing—I have an idea that he's one of the gang of rustlers that have been operatin' hereabouts. Bug Eye said he saw a scar-faced man ridin' away from the 8 X 8 the very day their cattle was stolen. And I'll lay money it was Froud!"

"Didn't I tell you?" cried Teddy excitedly, turning to Roy. "Froud! He's in that gang sure as fate! And so is Checkered Shirt! I can't give you a reason for saying that, but I'll bet it's so, just the same."

Mr. Manley looked over at his son.

"You mean that bad egg who was standin' outside Rimor's the day General an' Flash an' Star were rustled? The one I wanted to talk to later? The chap who vamoosed?"

"That's the one, Dad! Yes sir, he and Froud are together on these shady deals, I'll bet a gold mine!"

"Mebby," Mr. Manley said slowly, "mebby." He rested his foot against the lower rail of the corral fence. "But we can't do anything just

yet. Froud ain't in town now, that's sure. Wouldn't do any good to ride after him. What we've got to do, is to get him when he doesn't know we're comin'. I don't mind sayin' I'll have him for shootin' Gus."

Slow in speech, slow to declare what he intended to do, both Teddy and Roy recognized fixed determination in their father's tone. Froud's days of freedom were numbered. It might take time, but the boys knew that Mr. Manley would never rest until he had placed Froud behind bars—or put him permanently out of commission.

When the other punchers heard that Gus had been shot, they were loud in their declarations of vengeance upon Froud. Gus was well liked by all the boys on the X Bar X, and each puncher vowed:

"I'll square it up for you, Gus!"

Pop, especially, was wild with anger at the rustler. He asserted that:

"Shootin' a man is worse than stealin' the X Bar X brand," which, for Pop, was the criterion of mean and despicable actions.

Nell and Ethel had been persuaded to stay several days longer than they had intended, Belle meeting the objection that they "had no clothes," by the statement that on a ranch they needed none, and as Norine offered to wash any needed linen over night, the excuse of "no clothes" was taken from them.

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Truth to tell, Roy and Teddy were as insistent as was their sister that the girls stay. Having found that Nell and Ethel were no strangers to horses, Teddy and Roy took them for many miles over the mountainous land about the X Bar X, showing the real West. Ethel, or "Curly," as Teddy called her because of her light, tousled, bobbed hair, was a tireless rider, and she and Teddy had many happy jaunts over the prairie. In Teddy's language, she was "a regular fellow."

One afternoon, a few days following the incident of the wounding of Gus, found Nell, Ethel, Belle and the two boys listening to Nick play his mouth-organ in accompaniment with Sing Lung, who caused varied and sundry noises to come from his "fi'il." It was a slow day. The chores of the ranch having been attended to, Mr. Manley was waiting for something definite to lead him before starting the hunt for Gilly Froud. He had, of course, reported the shooting of Gus to the sheriff of Easton, a fairly large town to the south of Eagles, and aid in capturing the horse thieves had been promised. Mr. Manley was doubtful as to the efficacy of this help, but he determined to give the law a chance before acting.

Nick and Sing Lung were in the midst of "Oh, Susannah," when Belle and Ethel suddenly exclaimed in the same breath:

"Let's have a dance!"

“What’s that, a chorus?” Teddy asked, with a grin. “You two have been practicing, I can see that!”

“No, we just thought of it!” Ethel declared. “Wasn’t that funny, Belle, both saying it together?”

With a laugh, Belle agreed.

“But I really mean it,” she added. “We could use the living room and push all the furniture to one side. Would you play for us, Nick?”

Sure would, ma’am!” Nick declared, with a grin. “An’ Jim Casey can shake an accordion a little—or a whole lot, accordin’ to him,” and he chuckled noiselessly.

“And Sing Lung could play his fiddle!” Nell exclaimed. “That *would* be great!”

“Then it’s settled!” Belle cried. “A cowboy dance! Teddy, you can be master of ceremonies. Roy can be manager. We’ll have it to-morrow night!”

CHAPTER XVI

BUG EYE'S ARRIVAL

As Nick Looker said, "The day that the dance was to be that night dawned bright an' fair."

As manager of the entertainment, Roy had to see to it that the floor was prepared, the furniture moved, and everything made ready for the great occasion. Although Gus Tripp, because he had a slight fever, was forbidden by the doctor to take part in the festivities, he played the part of critical adviser to the rest of the punchers. From his bedside, he became a director of manly fashions, with the success of a Beau Brummel. Ethel overheard him speak to Jim Casey, who had approached him with a question concerning the wearing of a "diamond" stickpin in a green tie:

"Well, now, Jim, you gotta to use restraint in yore manner of dress." Gus declared. "The correctly appointed gentleman don't never wear loud clothes. As George Beaumont Fletcher says, when you come outer a drawing-room—that's a high-hat name fer picture-

gallery—no one ought to be able to tell what you had on. That don't mean you should go in a bathin' suit. It means you should be able to march in front of a herd of yearlings without stampedin' 'em. Now let me see that pin, Jim. Put her in the tie. Now—jest stand over a bit more—by the window. There! Um—no, I'm afraid not, Jim. She don't match. She *clashes*! Yore dress should be like a symfunny ochestra, Jim. Everything's gotta match. Now if you was to put that pin in a *red* tie, instead of a *green* one, she might do O. K. Yep—a *red* tie is what you need! Then come back an' let me see how she looks."

There were few who dared dispute Gus's taste in the matter of clothes, but among these insurgents was Pop Burns. He flatly refused to listen to Gus.

"I ain't no dude," Pop proclaimed forcibly. "If I can't put on decent clothes to go to a jamboree without a New Mexican buckeroo tellin' me, I'll dry up an' blow away. I suppose if Gus didn't have a busted arm, he'd be puttin' on spats an' carryin' a cane. Huh! I goes like a man, not like a bloomin' fashion dummy!"

But for all Pop's protests, the preparations went forward with gusto. Strange to relate, the general store at Eagles was completely stripped of green ties. To Teddy, this was a mystery until he happened to hear Norine hum-

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ming "The Wearing of the Green." Then Teddy nodded his head sagely and grinned.

The first thing Nell and Ethel had thought of after it had been decided to have the dance was, naturally, their "party dresses." Each girl had brought one evening gown with her, but these were fifteen miles away at the 8 X 8. Belle it was who solved the problem.

"If Teddy or Roy were to ride over for them, they would probably crush the dresses flat before they got here," Belle declared. "But I know what we *can* do—we can telephone Bug Eye to bring them over in the flivver. Then they'd get here in plenty of time."

The two guests fell in with this idea enthusiastically, and asked their uncle by phone to have his man drive over with the dresses. Mr. Ball readily agreed, declaring Bug Eye would have them there by evening unless he got caught in a cyclone.

By late afternoon, the living room had been made ready for the dance. Belle, Ethel and Nell had, under the direction of Mrs. Manley, decorated the apartment in truly festive style. Brightly colored streamers of silk hung from the ceiling, and Roy or Teddy did not even guess they were Belle's old hair-ribbons tied together. Flowers were placed in every available spot, chairs were arranged along the walls, and in one corner a platform of boards was erected for the orchestra, which was to consist

of Nick Looker, with his mouth-organ, Sing Lung, violinist extraordinary, and Jim Casey, "Maestro of the accordion." Teddy's offer to be a trap-drummer, with tin pans for drums, was declined with thanks.

An hour before supper Nell and Belle Ada were in Belle's room, trying to decide which of Belle's light summer dresses she was to wear. Teddy, Roy, and Ethel were walking in the direction of the mess-house, to see if the orchestra was prepared to "execute" the dance numbers. As the three neared the kitchen, a determined voice reached their ears. Teddy held up his hand and they listened.

"I tell you that ain't the proper way!" Nick was declaring loudly. "Now watch me, you iggernant punchers."

Teddy, Roy, and Ethel stole nearer and peeped through the door. What they saw caused Ethel to clap her hand to her mouth to avoid bursting into laughter.

The cowboys were standing about in attitudes of rapt attention. In the center was Sing Lung, a tablecloth around his waist, an old, faded, blue-cloth hat on his head, and a simpering grin on his face. The interpretation was obvious. He was made up to resemble a girl! Toward him walked Nick Looker, his right hand resting on his chest, his head bent deferentially.

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Striding to within a pace of the cook, Nick bowed low.

"I begs you to excuse the liberty," he said with a precious accent, "but may I have the honor of this jig?"

"*Dance*, not *jig*, you Indian!" Bad Sell roared. "A gentleman don't never ask a lady to *jig*!"

Nick turned a haughty look upon the interrupter.

"Who's doin' this askin'; you or me?" he demanded coldly.

"All right! All right! Go ahead in yore own dumb way! You'll learn!"

"I'm tryin' to learn you birds!" Nick exclaimed. "I know how! Now look! You goes up to Norine an'—I mean you goes up to the lady an' bows. Then you says: 'Pardon me fer takin' the liberty, ma'am, but mahvis dance?' "

"What? What was that last?"

"Mahvis dance! Didn't you ever hear that, you iggernant bronco-busters? That's what you say when you want to waltz—you say 'mahvis dance, please'?"

"But what's it *mean*?" Nat Raymond demanded.

"I don't know what it means," Nick answered. "But you *gotta* say it. All the tony gents do. 'Mahvis dance?' Like that."

"What on earth can he mean?" Ethel asked

in a whisper of the boys. "I never heard anything like it in my life! And will you look at Sing Lung! Honestly, I—"

"Sh-h-h!" Teddy warned, with a grin. "This is good! Listen! Maybe we'll find out what he means later."

So intent were the punchers on the etiquette of the ballroom, as expounded by Mr. Nick Looker, that they never glanced in the direction of the door. With suppressed mirth that threatened to break all bounds at any moment, Ethel, Roy, and Teddy watched the scene.

"Now what I do?" Sing Lung wanted to know. "I mebbly kiss you, hey?"

"No! No!" Nick roared, his face a fiery red. "You don't do nothin' of the kind! You say 'Cern'ly, pleecetuh!' That's all. Go on, say it."

"Celn'ly, pleecetuh," simpered Sing Lung.

"That's right! Here, Nat, you try it. Don't forget, Sing is a lady, even though he don't know it. Go ahead!"

With an exaggerated gait, Nat Raymond strutted forward. Bowing down, he said to Sing Lung:

"Askin' your liberty fer a-takin' of the pardon, ma'am, but—but—Nick, why in thunder don't you dry up and blow away! I can't remember that crazy thing you say!"

"Celn'ly, pleecetuh!" Sing Lung replied. He was doing his part.

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Nick threw his hat on the floor in disgust.

"Mahvis dance, you bonehead!" he shouted. "Mahvis dance! Mahvis dance! Can't you remember that?"

Roy could hold in no longer. He burst out in a roar of laughter.

"I know what he means now!" he gasped. "Oh, for Pete's sake! He means, '*May I have this dance!*' Wow! Hold me up, somebody! Mahvis dance! Jimminy! I'm going to cave in, sure! Nick, you old—" and vainly Roy struggled for breath.

Like a flash, every head turned in the direction of the door. Nick grinned in embarrassment. Sing Lung, with a yell, tore off the apron and hat.

"I'm sorry, Nick, but I couldn't help it!" Roy gasped. "We just happened to hear what you said. Sing, you sure are one fine lady! Excuse me, boys, but I just have to—" and he went off in another gale of merriment.

Ethel and Teddy were doing their best to preserve straight faces, but the strain was too much. They, too, started to laugh.

"Sure, go ahead!" Nick said, with a grin. "We don't mind it. I was just showin' the boys how to act to-night. You see, they don't know nothin' about polite society, an' I—"

"Yea, I suppose you know it all!" Pop Burns burst out. "Teddy, what's that crazy

thing this coot's been tellin' us. What does 'mahvis dance' mean?"

"It means 'may I have this dance!'" Teddy answered. "Nick, you take the first prize. Where did you ever hear that?"

"What, mahvis dance?" Nick asked. "Why, that's what those New Yorkers said over at Easton when they had that dance fer the benefit of the starvin' Negroes or somethin'. I went to it, so I know. But these hyenas, here, don't pay no attention to me!"

"You just go on explaining to them, Nick," Ethel advised, with a smile. "You're perfectly right. 'Mahvis dance' is correct."

"There, I told you!" Nick exclaimed triumphantly. "Now mebbly you'll listen! I *knew* I was right!"

"He's your friend for life," Roy declared, with a grin, as he, Ethel, and Teddy walked back to the house, leaving the cowboys to "professor" Nick Looker. "Say, this dance will be a riot! I'll bet every one of those boys, except, maybe, Pop Burns, is in love with Norine! There's going to be some wild struggle to decide who has the first waltz with her!"

Supper at the X Bar X was quickly concluded, and the hour for the dance approached. By dint of much coaxing, Gus obtained permission to sit on the side and watch.

"Won't hurt me a bit," he proclaimed. "I feel fine! Arm don't hurt a-tall."

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As the darkness deepened, Nell and Ethel became somewhat worried about their evening dresses. Surely Bug Eye should have been here by now. Mr. Manley went to the phone and called up the 8 X 8. When he returned his face wore a puzzled look.

"Pete Ball says Bug Eye started three hours ago. He's got your dresses in the flivver, an' said he should have reached here by six o'clock. Something must have happened to him—a puncture, or a blowout. We'll just have to wait, that's all."

A half hour went by, and still no Bug Eye. Nell and Ethel began to grow restless. The party would be a total failure without their evening dresses, they felt.

"Do you think he'll come?" Nell asked Mr. Manley, over and over again.

"Unless he's hurt, he will," the cattle owner responded. "I guess he'll get here before the dance starts. We'll wait till late before the music begins."

But when nine o'clock arrived and there was still no sign of Bug Eye with the dresses, it was decided to go ahead. Ethel and Nell were disappointed, but they made the best of it. Belle and her mother lent them some scarfs and accessories, but they did not have dresses that would fit either of the visitors.

"I guess we'll just have to go without party gowns," Nell sighed regretfully. "But it

would have been such fun if we could only be dressed up like you, Belle!"

"Never mind, the boys won't know the difference," Belle consoled them. "And certainly Teddy and Roy won't mind. You can have just as much fun in knockabout dresses. Anyway, Bug Eye might still arrive."

By nine-thirty all hope of getting the dresses was abandoned, and the "orchestra" started to tune up. Sing Lung drew his bow across the fiddle strings. Nick let out a blast on his mouth-organ. Jim Casey sent into the air a long, wailing note from his accordion.

Every person on the ranch had gathered in the living room. Pop Burns had his shoes polished until they rivaled the high-lights of his bald head. Gus Tripp sat proudly in the seat of honor at the side of the room, his arm swathed in bandages. Rad Sell was resplendent in a new yellow-striped shirt. Also it was noticed that Nick Looker had given up the idea of a diamond stickpin. He had on a green tie, as did every other hand on the ranch. The punchers were waiting eagerly for the music to start. And, Teddy noted gleefully, Norine stood demurely in a corner, garbed in a *red* dress!

Mr. and Mrs. Manley watched the scene with happy smiles. They were parents of children almost grown, but there were no younger people in that room than those two.

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Teddy walked to the middle of the floor.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he exclaimed pompously. "The dance is about to begin! Orchestra, are you all ready?"

"All set, Teddy!"

"We're ready!"

"We can do music when you say yes!"

"Then choose your partners!"

There was a wild rush. From the orchestra burst forth a strange medley of sounds. Heavy shoes shuffled over the floor. Norine, surrounded by eager punchers, laughed with delight.

Just then the outer door burst suddenly open. There was a quick shout. The music stopped in a harsh discord. All eyes were focused upon the entrance.

Leaning against the jamb, panting brokenly, his clothes covered with dust, stood Bug Eye. He looked around him wearily.

"Boys," he gasped, "I've been robbed! The flivver's gone! A gang of rustlers held me up! I had to walk for miles to get here! The thieves—they took the flivver, dresses, and everything, and left me flat! An', by golly, I know who done it, too!"

CHAPTER XVII

PURSUIT

SLOWLY the import of what Bug Eye had said was realized by every one in the Manleys' living room. Teddy ran forward. Roy was not a moment behind him.

"Sit down here, Bug Eye!" the younger boy cried, thrusting a chair toward the swaying man. With a gasp of relief, Bug Eye sank into it.

"I'm sure some tired," he declared slowly, "*and* thirsty! If I could have—"

"Just a second!" Roy hurried to the pitcher of water which stood on a table in a corner. "Here! Take it easy now. There's ice in it."

Bug Eye drank in great gulps, grunting with satisfaction. When he had finished he leaned back in his chair and looked at the ring of anxious faces. Even the orchestra had deserted its post and stood with the others, eagerly waiting for the story of the robbery.

"Are you hurt at all, Bug Eye?" Mr. Manley asked. "Anything we can get you?"

"No, I'm O. K. now, thanks," the man an-

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swered. "I was just thirsty and winded. Why, those double-distilled, knock-kneed, ornery bunch of tin mule-stealers, drat their hides, made me walk all the way from Sanborn's Point!"

"He's all right," Teddy said to Roy, with a grin. "The same old Bug Eye! Listen to him rave!"

Having gotten some of the accumulated feeling out of his system, the puncher ended with a vigorous "whoosh!" and started his story.

"Well, when the boss got your message," he said, nodding toward Nell and Ethel, "he told me to get set for a trip to the X Bar X. So I filled the ole puddle-jumper up with oil, gas, an' water. Long about four o'clock the boss gives me two boxes an' tells me to treat 'em careful. Roy, hand me that pitcher again, will you?" The young fellow complied, and after another drink Bug Eye went on:

"So I throws 'em in the back. I means I puts 'em in the back. Then Mrs. Ball comes out an' gives me another box, a small one, which she tells me to be *very* careful of. Says it's a present for Miss Belle here." And Bug Eye nodded once more. "So I puts that with the dresses—Mrs. Ball tells me what was in the other boxes, so I wouldn't sit on 'em by mistake," he apologized.

"Then I starts out. Got along fine till I reached Sanborn's Point—you know where

that is, hey Teddy? Well, I shoots her the gas, so's I can make the hill on high. But nothin' doin'. 'Bout half way up she stalls, an' I shoves her in low gear. Just as I do that, I hear a yell, an' three men with masks jumps from the bushes, guns out, business ends toward me, an' tells me to stop!"

There was a buzz of excited comment, and questions were shot at Bug Eye with machine-gun rapidity. He simply shook his head and went on.

"Now, boys, give me time! I'm tellin' it as fast as I know how. As I said, they tells me to stop. So I stops, not bein' crazy. They pulls me from the front seat an' pushes me into the bushes. Then they hop in, one of 'em behind the wheel, one of 'em keepin' me covered. The other watches out the side.

"An' up they go—up the hill an' down the other side, with flivver, dresses, present, an' all!"

"But, Bug Eye, you said something about knowing who did it!" Roy exclaimed. "Could you recognize the men?"

Bug Eye looked up at his questioner. He leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees.

"One of them," he said slowly and deliberately, "had a scar on the left side of his face!"

"Gilly—" Teddy burst out, and then stop-

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ped. His father cast a warning glance at him.

"Thought you said they had masks on?" Mr. Manley remarked.

"They did; but they was only half-masks," Bug Eye explained. "I could see the scar below."

"Do you know any one with a scar on the left side of his face?" the cattle owner questioned, looking sharply at the seated man.

Before he replied, Bug Eye got to his feet. His fists were clenched.

"I'll say I do!" he roared. "An' I got good reason, too! That's the hombre that's been rustlin' our cattle, an' you can't tell me any different."

"Why do you say that?" Teddy asked, leaning forward.

"Because I seen him!" Bug Eye exclaimed. "That's why! I was on the range that day the bunch was cut from our herd. I saw 'em go, too, an' made a dash for the rustlers. But they got away. There was one buckeroo who took a pot shot at me, an' I saw him close! He was the one with the scar on his face, an' he's the one who stole that flivver, or I'm a Siamese twin!"

"You don't know his name, do you?" Roy demanded excitedly.

"You mean what he *calls* himself? No, I don't! An' I don't want to either! I don't

need no introduction to a rattlesnake to shoot him!"

In the excitement, Gus Tripp had arisen and was listening with the rest. Now he walked forward and held out his uninjured hand to the driver of the stolen flivver.

"Shake, Bug Eye," he said solemnly. "You an' me are together on that. I'm lookin' fer that very same rattlesnake!"

"What happened to you?" Bug Eye asked, in surprise.

"Little accident," and Gus grinned sardonically. "Accident caused by that hombre with the scar on his face you tell about bein' interested in. He shot me."

"Yea? You don't say! Well, by golly, we'll get him! Shake!"

"Here, we're in on this!" Pop Burns cried, stepping forward. "He stole three of our best horses, each one with the purtiest X Bar X brand on it you ever see, 'cause I branded 'em myself!"

"What do you say, boys?" Mr. Manley cried, turning to the punchers. "Do we go after 'em? Hey?"

"You bet!" came his answer in a roaring chorus. "Let's go! Nick, throw that mouth-organ of yours out the window! We got business!"

"All right, boys! On our way!"

There was a rush for the door. Decorations

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were scattered ruthlessly. Chairs were tossed aside. And where, but a moment before, was a crowd of jostling, happy, overdressed cow-punchers, now stood only Mrs. Manley, Belle, Ethel, Nell and Norine, looks of anxiety on their faces. Even Gus Tripp had gone with the rest.

"Our evening dresses!" Ethel exclaimed mournfully. "We can say good-bye to them, I guess!"

"You may get them back!" Belle insisted. "When dad goes after some one he usually lands him; doesn't he, Mother?"

Mrs. Manley did not reply. She stood twisting her handkerchief into a tight knot. In her heart was a prayer that her two boys and her husband would come through safely.

Outside, Teddy, Roy, and the others were running for the corral.

"Hold on! Wait a minute!" Mr. Manley called. "We can't all go! Gus, where in thunder do you think you're bound for? Come back here! Want to be in bed two days more?"

"Aw, please, boss!" Gus coaxed. "I'm all right, honest! I want to get a crack at the guy who laid me up! Can't I come, boss?"

"No!" Mr. Manley said with finality. "You're too good a man to lose. You get back into the house. Anyway, we have to keep some men here. Teddy, Roy, Nick, Pop, Jim,

Bug Eye an' I will do the chasin'. The rest of you punchers hang around here. Can't tell but that Fr—I mean the thieves who stole the flivver—may have done it to draw us away from the X Bar X. We have to keep our heads up. They're not goin' to pull off any more robberies if I can help it! Climb aboard your brones, boys, an' let's go! Nick, get a mount for Bug Eye."

Without stopping to change their resplendent attire for something more serviceable, the X Bar X punchers whom Mr. Manley had named flung themselves on to their horses. White shirt fronts stuck out grotesquely from vivid-colored vests. Green ties flaunted free in the night wind. "City trousers" tickled the horses' sides. Yet from each belt hung a heavy revolver.

"Step on it!" Mr. Manley yelled as they swept out of the yard. "All you've got, boys! Don't waste any time! We'll get those rustlers, or know the reason why! No slip-ups this time!"

Across the moonlit range the riders galloped. Men and boys leaned forward in their saddles. On each face was a look of grim determination.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

HIGH above the riders, the full moon shone, a white orb set in the velvet blackness of the sky, lighting the scene with a silvery radiance. Soon the buildings of the X Bar X were left behind and the horsemen raced swiftly over the open range. Bug Eye was in the lead, and he made straight for the spot where he had been held up.

Teddy and Roy were riding side by side, a short distance behind their father.

"If we're able to trail the thieves, we may find out something about our horses!" Teddy yelled to his brother.

"Hope so," Roy returned. "It'll be a good night's work if we do."

On and on they rode. There was little time for conversation, as the ponies were flashing along at their best speed. They came to an up grade, at the top of which was Sanborn's Point. As they neared their destination, Mr. Manley called to Teddy:

"You an' Roy stick close to Bug Eye. I'm

going to come in from the left, and see if I can spot the rustlers."

Teddy nodded and spurred his mount onward. Shouting to Nick and Pop to follow him, Mr. Manley wheeled about in a semi-circle. The rest followed Bug Eye.

"Almost there!" Bug Eye yelled to Roy. "Where's yore dad goin'?"

"He's circling around to the left, so he can cut in! There's a trail that leads to Hawley—guess you know the one I mean—and dad's figuring on cutting the thieves off, if they went that way!"

"Good idee!"

With a final dash, Bug Eye's party reached Sanborn's Point. Bug Eye held up his hand, and all pulled the horses back.

"Right here is where she happened," the puncher said. "I was coming up the hill, and when I got here they jumped me. Then they went over this rise in the flivver, an' I lost sight of 'em. See! There's the tracks of the wheels! Boy, I'm sure thankful there's a moon! Now we can foller them tracks, an' we may run into the galoots after all!"

As Bug Eye had said, the imprints of the tires led over the hill. Slowly the punchers followed them, and when the rise was topped Teddy gave a yell.

"The tracks go left from here! Just the way dad went! Come on—let's go!"

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Leaving the road, the men followed the tire trail off to the left. In the soft soil this was not a hard thing to do, and they could ride faster now and still keep the tracks in sight.

"If we ever catch up to them waddies, they'll wish they'd never seen that tin mule!" Bug Eye vowed. "Makin' me walk all them miles! What'd they want with a Lizzie, anyhow? Did they think I was carryin' dust or somethin'? By golly, I bet they took the car out of plain cussedness! They don't want that flivver any more than the man in the moon!"

"Seems like you're right, there," Roy agreed. "But you never can tell. We've got a little account to settle with scar-face, and the sooner we square it the better."

"Say, Bug Eye, you didn't happen to notice whether one of those men who robbed you had on a checkered shirt, did you?" Teddy called out as he rode along.

"Checkered shirt? Well, now that you mention it, I do remember just that! Long, stringy sort of ranger, with a peaked hat? Yep! Why did you ask that, Teddy?"

"Tell you later, Bug Eye," the boy answered. He felt that this was no time for explanations, when they were riding hard to catch the man who had taken Flash. Teddy was sorry the flivver had been stolen. "But," he said to himself, "what's a flivver compared to Flash?"

Jim Casey, who was riding slightly in the rear, suddenly gave a yell.

"Here's somethin' like a box at the side of the road!" he called. Bug Eye looked to where Jim was pointing, and then jumped off his pony. He ran toward the object, and, bending over, he examined it carefully.

"We're on the right trail, boys!" he exclaimed. "This here is the box Mrs. Ball gave me fer yore sister, Teddy. But it's empty, now. Whatever was in it, the thieves took. Well, that's some help! Roy, we ought to meet up with yore dad soon, unless he made a powerful wide circle."

Remounting again, Bug Eye and the rest resumed their chase. Ahead of them they spied three horsemen.

"There's dad now!" Roy cried, forcing his mount onward. "Yay, Dad! Find anything?"

"Not yet! But we've not finished! How'd you make out?"

"We got a clue, boss!" Jim Casey answered. "I spotted a box in the road an' Bug Eye says it was in the flivver with him. So the thieves must have come this way."

Roy spurred his horse close to his father's.

"Another thing, Dad," the boy remarked in a low voice. "Bug Eye said that one of the hold-up men had on a checkered shirt!"

"You don't say!" Mr. Manley appeared

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startled. "But of course we have to remember that there's probably more than one checkered shirt around here, though I don't recall ever seein' one as loud as the one we noticed at Eagles. Roy, that's right interestin' news!"

"Do we go on, boss?" Nick Looker asked.

"We sure do!" the ranch owner answered forcibly. "We'll trail that flivver till we get it, by jinks!"

Once more the riders started off. The night was growing misty now, and the tracks were harder to see, so that the punchers had to proceed more slowly. Once Pop Burns thought he saw the car at one side, but it proved to be only a large boulder.

After riding some five or six miles, Mr. Manley called to his party to halt.

"There's something fishy about this," the cattle owner declared. "These tracks don't seems to get any place! An' by the way, there's more than one car in this part of the country, though I can't think why any one would take this trail unless they wanted to get away in a hurry. Let's spread out, and cover more ground. Even if we do find the flivver, it won't help us much. It's a cinch the thieves aren't going to hang around it, once it stops; an' it can't go on forever. How much gas did it have in the tank, Bug Eye?"

"Plenty, Mr. Manley. I filled her up just before I started."

“Then the rustlers can lead us a merry chase. Now I have an idea that they may have left one man to drive the flivver, so as to fool us into following the tracks, while the other two—and I’ll bet they’re the two we want to get—took a side path. Yep, boys, we ought to separate. We can cover more ground then.”

“Say when, boss,” Nick Looker exclaimed. “We’ll rake this range with a fine comb!”

“Well, let’s get started then! Every man for himself! Spread out! If you get into trouble, fire three shots. But don’t get too far apart, so the fellow next to you couldn’t hear them. I’ll be the center man, and you can deploy on me. Open up now, boys, an’ let’s go!”

With a yell to the horses, the chase started anew. Teddy and Roy took the left and right of Mr. Manley, each riding out straight for a quarter of a mile, and then turning. The others rode the same distance from the man nearest to him, until there was a long line streaked across the prairie. The ground was fairly level here, and there were few trees, the growth being mostly sage bush.

More clouds had obscured the face of the moon, making the night dark. Roy tried to keep an even interval from his father and the man on his right, but he found that this was impossible, so he rode forward hoping he might catch a glimpse of the rustlers.

A slight grade rose ahead of him, and he

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urged his mount up it. A little to his left he saw a small clump of trees. Deciding to ride close to these, Roy pulled his horse over. As he did so, he uttered an exclamation.

Out of the group of trees had ridden a man on horseback. He turned, and saw Roy coming toward him. Wheeling his bronco about, he re-entered the shadow of the grove.

Roy leaped his steed forward to the edge of the wooded section. He heard the sound of a creaking saddle and turned swiftly. His hand flashed down to his gun.

But he was too late. Not two feet from his head was the blue barrel of a revolver, held in a steady grasp.

"Welcome, stranger!" a sardonic voice exclaimed.

At that moment the moon slid from behind a cloud, lighting the scene with its pale glow. And, like some vision of the night, motionless and tense, a horseman sat facing Roy. The man's head was turned slightly to the right, and on the left cheek Roy saw a deep scar.

CHAPTER XIX

ESCAPE

It was not fright that held Roy motionless, but a realization of the hopelessness of resistance. A slight tightening of the crooked finger that touched the trigger would send a ball of lead tearing through his body, and at the short range there could be but one result. It seemed best to Roy that he bide his time.

"Nice of you to call on me like this," Gilly Froud went on, in that sinister, mocking tone. "An' I begs you'll excuse the looks of the place. We ain't quite ready to receive visitors, yet."

"What did you do with our horses and with Bug Eye's flivver?" Roy asked, looking straight at the man.

This Froud was no weakling. He sat hunched over in his saddle, huge shoulders bent forward. The arm which supported the gun wavered not an inch, but held firm as a rock.

"Don't start askin' questions," Froud growled. "It won't do you no good, 'cause I don't know nothin' about yore hosses. I heard

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you had 'em stolen from the hitchin' rail at Eagles. Well, any one who's fool enough to leave a hoss unguarded in that town, should have him stolen!"

"That's a lie, Froud, and you know it!" Roy said hotly. "They'd never have been touched if it hadn't been for you—and that pal of yours in the checkered shirt."

"Hey? What's that?" Froud exclaimed in a startled voice. The muzzle of the gun pointed downward for a moment, but Froud quickly brought it to bear again upon the boy. "What do you know about a man in a checkered shirt? Speak up!"

"Enough," Roy ventured grimly. He was watching the rustler closely, ready to take advantage of any chance offered. But Froud did not relax his vigilance.

"What's his name, this bird in the—er—striped shirt?" the former cowboy from the X Bar X demanded.

"I don't know his name, but I know him!" the boy exclaimed. "And I know he's one of your gang, too!"

"So you don't know his name, hey?" Froud appeared relieved. "Well, he's no friend o' mine. He travels with a different outfit than what I do. Here—"

Froud suddenly peered out from the trees. The next moment he jammed the gun into Roy's ribs.

"You make a sound an' I'll drill you sure!" he whispered fiercely.

Cautiously, Roy turned his head. Not fifty feet away was his brother Teddy, riding slowly along past the grove.

"Quiet!" Froud ordered softly between set teeth. "If you want to see how two ounces of lead feels between yore ribs, just yell! By golly, I'll blow yore liver right out o' you!"

Roy recognized the desperate ring in the rustler's voice and knew that the least move on his part would result in his death. Froud was seized with a sort of panic, and at the slightest sign from Teddy that the latter knew of his brother's plight, the rascal would start shooting.

As Roy saw his brother pass out of sight, he felt the pressure of the gun at his side relax, and Froud unconsciously sighed with relief.

"I'm takin' no chances," he whispered in Roy's ear. "Don't you talk till I say so! Do you hear?"

A moment more, and the sound of Teddy's horse died away in the distance.

"Guess he's gone," Froud declared. "But I don't want no funny work, savvy? Don't think that because I haven't got this gun stuck in yore ribs that I ain't got you covered. You keep both yore hands on the pommel of yore saddle—no lower."

"If you didn't steal our bronses, what's the

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idea of being so touchy?" Roy asked in as innocent a voice as he could summon. "Why not let me ride on and try to find the thieves who took Bug Eye's flivver?"

"That's my business!" Froud retorted savagely. "When I wants advice from you, I'll ask for it, see? I ain't forgot how your old man kicked me off the X Bar X!"

"He had a right to!" Roy cried angrily. "You were mistreating Flash, and you know it! Dad didn't want a man of your type about the place."

"Oh, he didn't, hey?" Froud growled. An ugly frown came to his face. "He's pretty pertic'lar, ain't he? That bronc of yore brother's needed a good lickin', and I was givin' it to him. I was interrupted. But since then I—" he stopped suddenly.

"You finished it, you mean!" Roy exclaimed, his fists clenched. "Froud, if you'll drop that gun I'll have it out with you right here!"

"Nice little hero!" Froud sneered. "College boy wants to fight bold bad man, does he? G'wan, you little rat! I could break you in two! Now shut up! I don't know where your brons are, an' that's the end of that! You can see I ain't ridin' Flash, or either of the other two. This is my own hoss. Satisfied?"

"I'll have to be, I guess," the boy said in a low voice.

“Now yore talkin’ sense! Say, how many of yore crowd is ridin’ tonight?”

“Seven.”

“Seven, hey! I reckon you’d better come with me. It’ll be morning soon; then you can ride back. If I turn you loose now, yore liable to get to the rest. Not that I’ve got anything to be afraid of!” the man added quickly. “But that brother of yours is hot-headed, and I wouldn’t put it past him to take a pot shot at me fer what I done to Flash. So come along.”

“Where?”

“See that clump of quakermasts over yonder? Head fer them.”

Against his will, Roy was forced to ride forward, while Froud trailed him closely, gun still in readiness. A faint glimmer of gray appeared in the east, betokening the coming dawn.

Froud knew he must put much territory between him and his pursuers before daylight, so he urged the horses on to a faster gait. Roy rode silently, hoping that his chance might come before he got too far away from the others to give the alarm. But as the two rode along, this hope dwindled, and the boy knew that, even if he did escape, he would not be able to reach the others in time to give chase to Froud.

Angry thoughts were milling in the boy’s mind as they neared the group of quakermasts.

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Turning his head slightly, Roy saw that they had reached a section of the country known as Harver's Gully. The light in the east was stronger now, and Roy could make out the Rocky Run River a few miles to the north. Further up the stream was the X Bar X, but if one followed the course of Rocky Run, winding as it did, it would require a ride of some three or four hours to reach the Manley ranch.

Roy knew that a steep hill arose beyond these trees. He wondered if Froud would make for this, but the next moment his captor ordered him to pull his horse up.

"We're stayin' here a spell," Froud said shortly. He rode closer to Roy. "So you think I travel with a man who wears a checkered shirt, hey?"

Startled by this question, apparently coming from a clear sky, Roy did not reply for a moment.

"Answer me!" growled Froud. He thrust his left hand out and seized the boy by the throat.

Like a flash, Roy realized his intention. For reasons of his own, Froud wanted Roy out of the way. If he could get him to draw, he could kill him in cold blood, and then say that he shot in self-defense. The fact that Roy had his gun in his hand would corroborate his story.

With anger surging within him at the

cowardly trick, Roy sat perfectly still. Froud wound his fingers about the boy's throat and, with a sneering laugh, made as if to choke him. Then with a grunt as if of contempt he took his hand away.

"You're not worth it," he snarled. "You an' that sissy brother of yores ought to be travelin' with a nurse!"

He looked keenly at Roy, but the young rancher did not reply. He stared long and steadily back at Froud.

"So you know Checkered Shirt, hey?" the rustler mused. "Well, I don't! I never saw him in my life! Get that? I don't know who he is!" Realizing that, by this very denial, forcible as it was, he admitted the thing he was repudiating, Froud stopped.

"You think yore pretty clever, don't you?" he demanded.

Roy made no answer. He kept staring at Froud.

"Answer me, you rat! Thought you'd corner me an' make me confess to a thing I never did, hey?"

"You're the best judge of that," Roy replied coldly.

For a moment Froud glared at the boy. Then, with a snarl of rage, he leaped his horse forward.

This was the chance Roy had been playing for. Digging his heels into his pony's side,

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he met Froud head on. There was a wild yell. The boy threw himself on one side of his saddle at the very moment that Froud fired. Roy felt his horse twitch beneath him, and knew the pony had been hit. But the horse remained on its feet. Now the boy had his own gun out, and, taking as careful aim as he could in that poor light, he fired. The cattle rustler's face went white, and his right arm dangled helplessly.

But the rustler was not beaten yet, and, in a moment, had transferred his gun from his right to his left hand. He fired again, and Roy felt a sudden sting on his left ear. The boy took aim once more, and again pulled the trigger.

This time he missed completely, but Froud had had enough. Wheeling his horse about, he made off at a gallop.

Roy watched him go. He could not bring himself to shoot a man in the back, and Froud probably counted on this. He also knew that Roy would not follow, for, with a wounded horse, he had small chance of catching the rustler.

Roy put his hand to his ear.

"Got it," the boy said as he saw a dark stain of blood. "Go on, run, you horse thief! I'll get you later!"

Roy then remembered that he had felt his pony wince, and the boy dismounted to learn

the extent of the bronco's hurt. It was merely superficial, Roy noted with relief, and while the horse would have to travel slowly, there was no danger from the wound. He had been hit in the right flank.

The sun was high above the horizon when Roy rode into the yard of the X Bar X. He was tired and thirsty. His face was bloody from the wound in his ear. His horse was limping painfully.

As Roy looked up, he saw his father running toward him.

"All right, Dad," the boy called cheerfully. "I've quite a story to tell! No, I'm not hurt. Just got a nick in the ear. Did you find the flivver?"

"Roy!" Mr. Manley exclaimed. "Son, I'm glad you're back! Your mother's been awful worried—an' so have I! What happened?"

"Well, I found Froud, for one thing. But wait till I get a drink and some food in me, and I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XX

THE DECISION

ROY's breakfast was flavored with the tale of his moonlight ride to Harver's Gully. Between bites he told the story of his meeting with Froud and of the rustler's strange insistence that he did not know Checkered Shirt.

"You say Froud wasn't riding one of our horses?" Teddy asked.

"No. He was sitting on a bronc I never saw before. One of his own, or maybe one he rustled from another outfit. Somehow, he seemed puzzled after he had me covered, as if he didn't know what to do with me. Took him a mighty long time to decide to bring me to Harver's Gully."

Neither Mr. Manley nor Teddy had yet taken to their beds, having reached the X Bar X but an hour before Roy. All night they had spent in looking for the missing youth, and at last they had decided he might have returned home. They were about to start on another search when Roy rode into the yard.

"Say, Dad, did you find that flivver?" Roy

asked, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. A strip of adhesive tape marked the spot where the bullet had torn his ear.

"We did," the ranchman stated. "Teddy marked it in a ditch. Wasn't hardly worth sweepin' up. They'd stripped it clean and smashed the motor to pieces with a wrench. Bug Eye was seein' red. He could hardly talk. By golly, if the same gang is doin' all this dirty work, they've got an awful lot to settle for!"

"I'll tell a maverick they have!" Roy declared hotly. "And they'll settle, too! Froud made a mistake when he brought me over to Harver's Gully. I've got an idea that the gang's headquarters is around there some place. Teddy, you and I will have to take a ride over there soon. It's right on a deep part of the river, you know, and we might get a few fish—though the kind of fish I'd like to get can't be caught with a hook and line."

It was eight o'clock before Roy threw himself upon his bed and gave himself over to the blissful luxury of complete relaxation. The others who had joined in the chase, including of course Mr. Manley and Teddy, were likewise catching up on some sleep. At twelve o'clock the ranch yard presented a strangely deserted appearance. When usually the cowboys would be yelling loudly for Sing Lung to hurry up with that grub, now from the bunk-house sounded only the snores of punchers sunk deep

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in slumber. Those who had not gone on the night ride stayed as silent as possible, out of respect for their fatigued brothers. But it would have taken a salvo of twenty-one guns to awaken those buckers.

At four o'clock Roy opened his eyes full upon a beam of sunlight that shot through his window and played upon his face. Automatically he turned upon his side, then saw that in the bed across from him Teddy still slept peacefully. Reaching over, Roy gently raised the window shade, so that the sun now shone upon Teddy. The boy moved restlessly, threw his hand over his eyes, then turned and saw his brother grinning at him.

"What time?" he asked in a monotone.

"Six-thirty! You going to sleep all day? I've been up hours. Had lunch and went for a ride with Curly.

"Curly? You mean Nell?"

"No, I mean Ethel. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Then, when he saw the grin on his brother's face, Teddy turned to the wall with a snort of disgust.

"Don't be silly! You just woke up yourself. Six-thirty! Humph! I'll bet it's about twelve o'clock. Well—" as he looked at a watch on the chair beside him—"it's only a little after four, anyway. I knew you were kidding."

"Yes, you did! I noticed that as soon as I

said I'd been riding with Curly. But say, we'd better get up."

"Wait a minute. I want to ask you a few questions about Froud, Roy. You say he got sore when you mentioned Checkered Shirt?"

"I'll tell a maverick he did! There's something up between those two. I wish we could come across that hombre in the cross-word puzzle laundry-piece!"

"He probably's got another by now. Even rustlers have got to change their shirts once in a while. But, seriously, what made you think that Harver's Gully is headquarters for Froud's gang?"

"Because, didn't he head right for there? And then when we got there he seemed sort of sorry he'd come. He thought I knew too much for the good of his health. Golly, Ted, when you rode by that grove of trees I sure held my breath! Froud had his gun stuck hard into my ribs, and if you had taken it into your head to ride in I'd be strummin' a harp right now."

"Oh, well, if I had come in, Froud might have beat it off. Can't tell. Roy, you should have seen that flivver! The top was ripped completely off. Two tires were flat. The motor was a wreck. It looked as though it had been struck by lightning."

"Wonder what they did all that for? I sup-

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pose you didn't find the dresses Mrs. Ball sent over?"

"Not a trace. Looked like a spite job to me. Bug Eye said the same. If he ever catches the gang who held him up, he'll spite 'em!"

"Did he go back to the 8 X 8?"

"No; he's asleep in the bunk-house. He wants to have another look for the thieves, I guess. If his boss thinks it's the same gang that stole his cattle, he'll let Bug Eye search all he wants to—and maybe help him. I've got a hunch that something is bound to break soon. The people around these parts are pretty sick and tired of having those roughnecks play fast and loose with their property."

"You said a mouthful! Come on! Let's hit the deck. We've got plenty to do."

"Think we ought to have another go at the dance to-night?"

"Not me! Anyway, the evening dresses of Nell and Ethel are lost, and so they won't be so keen for it. We'll just let it slide. Things are going to be pretty lively here from now on. There won't be much time for dancing."

Springing from his bed, Roy walked to the bathroom and doused his head and face with cold water. Teddy did the same, and after "slicking up" a bit the two boys made for the yard. Mr. Manley was standing talking to Nick Looker when Roy and Teddy approached.

"Roy," his father called, "c'mere a second, will you? Want to ask you some more about that scar-faced friend of yours. Whereabouts in Harver's Gully did he take you?"

"Well, there's a grove of quakermasts down on the near side of the river. If you keep on going, you'd come to a small rise, from which you could see for a good distance on either side. I rode over there only last fall."

"Yore dad said you had an idee the rustlers hang out around there," Nick stated. "That so, Roy?"

"I don't know whether it's so or not, Nick; but that's what I think. As I told dad, Froud seemed kind of sorry he'd brought me to the gully. Then he ducked as soon as he could without waiting to fight it out with me, though I winged him in the arm after he'd nicked me here," and Roy pointed to his ear. "He's got to have that arm of his treated some place, or he'll get poisoned. The nearest doctor is over at Hawley. Say, I think I'll—"

"Telephone to him to hold a man with a wounded arm?" Teddy interrupted. "I thought of that, too. Go ahead, Roy. Myself, I don't figure much on getting Froud that way. But it won't do any harm to try."

Mr. Manley said they would wait there while Roy telephoned. When the boy returned his face bore a disappointed look.

"Doc said he'd been there early this morn-

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ing and gone," Roy declared. "We might have had a chance if I had called up sooner. Well—"

"The doc couldn't have held him," Mr. Manley broke in. "Suppose it happened to be the wrong man? Doc 'ud be in a fine fix then. No, boys, we've got to work this thing out for ourselves. No use foolin' around. The thing to do is to ride that varmint down an' snub his horns so he can't do no more damage. Seems to me he's got a streak of real meanness in him. Didn't do him no good a-tall to steal that flivver. He just wanted to act up. Well, his time will come. An' when it does, he's got an awful lot to account for!"

Bug Eye made his appearance at six o'clock. He had slept off his wild anger at finding his flivver wantonly wrecked, but still the indignity of being made to walk all those miles to the X Bar X smouldered within him. A cowboy's legs are not for walking, they are to keep him steady on a horse.

Upon being told of Roy's adventure with Froud, Bug Eye asked Mr. Manley for a horse to ride after the rustler, but he was persuaded to calm down and sit tight for a bit.

"This waitin' gets on my nerves," he proclaimed to the world in general. "If I had my way, I'd get a gang together an' stick so close to that hoss-thief's neck that his feet would bust through the soles of his shoes."

"Yea, an' have his head for cover, pronto," Nick sneered, "with twenty head of yore cattle, our three horses, an' Pete knows how much else. Then where'd we be? No sir, the thing to do is to go about this thing like you was eatin' custard pie. Soft an' easy, but sure to get there. We don't want no more flare-backs. Twice we almost stumbled on their heels, an' both times they stepped out o' their shoes an' vamoosed right quick. Why, Teddy an' Roy got within shootin' distance of Froud up on Mica Mountain, but it didn't do no good, an' it wasn't the boys' fault that they got away, either. So when we get 'em, we want to get 'em good. None of this half-way business for us."

This seemed the general consensus of opinion at the X Bar X, and nothing was done immediately except to notify the sheriff at Hawley that a hold-up had occurred and that some property was stolen from a car.

"Though I might as well have told a cigar store Indian for all the good it'll do," Mr. Manley declared, with a grim laugh. "That sheriff is more politics than he is sheriff. Whatever roundin' up of thieves we want done, we've got to do ourselves."

CHAPTER XXI

NEWS FROM THE 8 X 8

THE next morning Peter Ball sent a car for Nell and Ethel, and, together with Bug Eye, the girls went back to the 8 X 8. Roy and Teddy were sorry to see them go, as was Belle Ada, but they consoled themselves with the thought that they could easily ride over to the Ball ranch later and see them. It was arranged that Belle should go on a visit to the 8 X 8 before the summer was over.

The business of ranching was taken up once more at the X Bar X, although an undercurrent of vigilance seemed to be ever present. Days of being without Star and Flash did not seem to console the boys appreciably for their loss. Rather, as each day passed they realized more and more keenly that Flash and Star had meant a great deal to them. Mr. Manley, although he did not dwell on the misfortune of losing General, as did Roy and Teddy over their ponies, yet wished heartily that he had the bronco back.

Gus Tripp's arm healed rapidly, and he was

in the saddle again within a week, looking, as he said, whiter than he had since he was four years old. Otherwise he was little the worse for his experience. Of course the arm was still bandaged but Gus said that was only a reminder, "like you'd tie a string around yore finger, so's not to fergit somethin'." When asked what it was that he wanted to remember, he answered vaguely that it had something to do with rattlesnakes.

Several times Nick and Pop had ridden into Eagles, watching for Checkered Shirt, but the man seemed to have left that part of the country. No one in town had seen him for a week. The barkeeper at Rimor's had likewise disappeared for the time being.

One morning Roy and Teddy determined to go fishing. The day was just right for the sport, cloudy, and they had hopes of bringing home a mess of mountain trout. By common consent, the boys agreed to ride to Harver's Gully and cast along that part of Rock Run River which flowed by the spot.

Having arrived at the gully, the two boys rode slowly through the grove of quakermasts where Roy had been held captive. Then they mounted the hill on the other side and looked sharply about them.

"Don't see much of importance, do you?" Teddy queried.

"Not much. Guess I was mistaken. But it

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looked queer, I'll tell a maverick! I thought sure we'd find something hereabouts."

"After all, it was only a hunch," Teddy stated. "Most of the time they go wrong. Come on, let's give the fish a whirl. Pop said they're running fine."

Riding down the incline, the boys came once more to the river. At this time of year it was a sizable stream, the snow on the mountains, having melted and run down, had swelled it to almost a flood stage. The water hissed merrily against the lines as Teddy and Roy cast.

For some minutes neither got a strike. Then Roy, who was up-stream from his brother, suddenly saw his line go taut.

"Strike!" he called out, and Teddy, abandoning his own casting, ran toward Roy.

"Feels like a whale!" the boy sang out. "Hand me that net, Ted!"

There was haste to oblige, and Roy played his fish carefully. The trout seemed not unused to the ways of anglers, for it did not dash aimlessly about, but with short, purposeful spurts prevented the young rancher from taking in much line.

"Looks as if you were in for a fight!" Teddy exclaimed, watching with interest the contest between his brother and the fish. "He's no amateur at this business, that trout! He knows his stuff!"

"I'll tell a maverick he does!" Roy said, breathing hard. "Golly, he must weigh a ton! He's *some* scrapper!"

Suddenly the line swayed down, hanging loosely.

"Now's your chance!" Teddy shouted. "Reel in! Reel in!"

Roy needed no such advice, for he was reeling in as fast as he could. Then, with a slight twang, the line tightened. Roy was still taking in slack when it happened, and he could not stop in time. There was a quick jerk, and the frayed end of the cord dangled from the tip of the rod. The fish had won.

Roy threw the pole down in annoyance.

"Thought I had him, sure!" he declared. "Ever see a fish act like that before? Wise as they make 'em! He just waited until I started to reel in, then stopped short and broke the line. Well, he sure timed it pretty. My respects to a clever fish," and he removed his hat and made a mock bow.

"But he's carrying quite a weight of line," Teddy said, with a chuckle. "He'll have that to remember you by, Roy."

"Like fun he will!" his brother cried. "He knows his apples, that fish. He'll just swim around a stump a few times, tangle the line in it, give a jerk and he's free. I know that kind. Some of 'em can speak Greek and Latin."

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The boys fished with fair luck for an hour or so longer, Teddy landing two large ones and Roy three smaller trout. The "whopper" that had struck Roy's line did not return, though the ranch lad had coaxed him with all the brightly colored flies in his packet.

"Getting sort of late," Teddy remarked, as he stood on the bank adjusting a hook. "What say we cut for home? We've got quite a ride ahead of us, you know. Let's get started."

Roy nodded.

"I just want to make one more cast. Something tells me that the big fellow I hooked first is still hanging around. If he is, and wants some more fun, I'll give it to him! Just once more, Teddy."

The boy drew back his rod for a cast. His arm still bent back, Teddy caught his wrist. Roy looked up in surprise.

"What—" he began. Then he saw the look on his brother's face and stopped.

"Keep quiet!" Teddy whispered. "Through the bushes there! See? A man on horseback!"

Roy stared intently. But he did not get a good view of the intruder, for the sound of a pony breaking trail came to the ears of the boys at that moment, and the horse and rider disappeared.

"Roy, I'll bet anything that was Froud!" Teddy exclaimed excitedly. "And he was on

Flash, too! I'd know that horse among a million! Golly, that settles it! Froud is the thief!"

"Are you sure it *was* Froud?" Roy asked. "I didn't get a good look at him—but what I saw didn't look a great deal like Scar Face!"

"He did to me!" Teddy insisted. Then the boy stepped from the side of the stream into the woods. He parted the bushes, and glanced about.

"Not a sign of him," he said regretfully. "Let's get our brones, Roy, and ride around here! There may be something to that theory of yours about the gang's headquarters."

The boys ran quickly to where they had left the horses. Teddy half expected to find them gone, but they were not, and, in a moment, the two young ranchers were mounted, having taken their rods apart and slipped them into a case as they ran.

They rode toward the place they had seen the figure and examined the earth for hoof-prints. These they easily discovered.

"He went this way," Roy declared, pointing. "We can ride along and see what we can find. It's toward home, anyway."

"I'll bet anything that was Froud on Flash!" Teddy remarked, almost to himself. "When he saw us he beat it. Let's follow up these tracks, Roy."

The boys cantered along, eyes upon the

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ground, easily tracing the marks in the soft earth near the side of the stream. For about a mile they rode. Then they were halted. The tracks led directly down into the stream.

"That stops us," Roy declared, in a disappointed tone. "He may have gone any place from here. Most likely he doubled back and crossed to the other side. Well, that's that! Another failure!"

"But I'm sure it was Flash he was on!" Teddy said in a positive voice. "I couldn't be mistaken there. We'll hurry back and tell dad. Maybe he'll want to go after the skunk."

The day was drawing to a close, and the two boys started homeward. Roy had not forgotten the fish, and these hung from the pommel of the saddle, giving the horse many uneasy moments trying to figure what those cold things were that kept tapping him on the side.

Teddy was really disappointed that they had not succeeded in catching the lone horseman, but Roy still had his doubts about the fellow being Froud. Little was said concerning the incident, however, until the boys reached the ranch yard of the X Bar X.

There all was confusion. Punchers were rushing about, catching their ponies and throwing saddles on with almost indecent haste. The corral was nearly empty of horses. Mr.

Manley stood in the center of the yard issuing orders.

As the brothers rode up they eyed this strange scene with puzzled frowns.

"For Pete's sake, what's all the shooting for?" Teddy inquired.

"Blamed if I know!" Roy answered. "Looks as if everybody was going some place! Hey, Dad, what's the trouble? Why all the fuss?"

"Didn't you hear?" Mr. Manley called out. "Where've you been— Oh, that's right, you've been fishin'. Well, we got some bad news from the 8 X 8."

"What do you mean?" came from Teddy quickly. "Have they been raided again?"

"That's just what happened!" the boys' father declared. "Rustlers got away with a hundred head of their cattle last night, an' plugged two of their men! We're ridin' out after the thieves—the whole 8 X 8 outfit an' us! This time we stay ridin' till we round up that gang, too."

Teddy and Roy looked at each other. Had the figure they had seen at Harver's Gully anything to do with this new outrage?

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM

"GOING to start now, Dad?" Teddy asked.

"Yes—right away! Can't afford to lose any more time. The bunch from 8 X 8 is due any minute now, an' we're goin' to start from here. We'll work in shifts—one gang take the trail to-night, and another in the mornin'. In that way we'll ride the rustlers down before they have a chance to cache the cattle. We want to prevent those thieves from driving the Durhams to a hiding place. If we keep on the jump, we may be able to get 'em before they make their way to a retreat."

Mr. Manley hurried toward the corral. The two boys dismounted and led their horses to the hitching rail, thinking they might need them soon.

"A hundred head of Durhams!" Roy mused. "Those fellows sure work fast! Mighty funny they didn't start something with the X Bar X herd."

"Guess they thought that the 8 X 8 outfit would be easier to raid. It looks like it was,

too. What kind of men has Pete Ball got riding his cattle to let rustlers raid their herd twice in a month?"

"Well, as I said before, that gang is pretty clever. They're no amateurs at the game, and I'll bet they've got half the men in Eagles in league with them, especially those who hang around Rimor's. Say, do you suppose dad wants us to come with him?"

"Wait here while I ask him."

Teddy walked rapidly toward his father. It was in his mind to tell his parent of the occurrence at Harver's Gully, but when he thought it over he realized that it would be but a slender clue and might lead the pursuers astray. Looking back, he could not be absolutely sure that that man was Gilly Froud, however much he appeared to be.

"No, son, I want you an' Roy to stay around here," Mr. Manley replied in answer to Teddy's question. "Mother is a bit worried, and she'll feel a lot safer if you two are here. You an' Roy can go out with the morning bunch—that is, if we don't spot the rustlers before that. Belle Ada has to get to the 8 X 8 in the morning, too, as she promised Nell and Ethel she'd come over. Myself, I'd rather she'd wait a few days, but she wants to go, so I'll let her. You and Roy can take her over, can't you? You can join in the chase later."

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"Sure, Dad, if you say so. We'll do whatever seems best to you."

Having communicated to Roy his father's advice, Teddy put the two ponies away for the night. He really wanted to ride with the rest, but he knew it would be better for him to stay at home until his father returned.

Six men from Peter Ball's place arrived just before supper, and after a hurried meal, the chase for the horse thieves started.

This time there was none of the wild rushing of the former pursuit. The men clucked quietly to their horses, and, led by Mr. Manley, they rode out of the yard. They were on a grim business, and each felt the responsibility of his position. They were banded together to wipe out a gang of rustlers. A stern task was ahead of them, and they simply proceeded toward it.

With most of the punchers riding away with Mr. Manley, the ranch yard of the X Bar X was now a quiet spot. For some minutes Roy and Teddy stood in silence, watching the dust settle. The sky was overcast, and the usual glory of the western sunset was missing. A drizzle of rain was falling, and, turning about, Teddy and Roy entered the ranch house, to eat in more leisurely manner than those who had gone on the chase.

Supper was rather a dreary meal. Try as she would, Mrs. Manley could not altogether

conceal her anxiety for the safety of her husband.

Teddy reached across the table and laid his hand over his mother's.

"Cheer up, Mom," he said, with a smile. "Dad's all right. You'll see him come rushing in here in the morning, saying that they caught the rustlers and is there any coffee and beans left."

"Oh, I hope so," Mrs. Manley replied, smiling slightly. "It is foolish of me to worry, and I won't do it any more. Certainly your father can take care of himself. Belle, dear, do be careful of that pitcher! Roy, pour your sister some milk. I know she'll spill it, reaching in that fashion."

There were those at the X Bar X who did not sleep much that night. Mr. Manley might return at any time and tell of success—or failure. Many times Teddy and Roy leaped up from their beds, where they were lying fully dressed, and ran to the window, only to find that the noise they had heard was the wind blowing a sningle across the yard or a horse in the corral rubbing against the rails. The drizzle stopped, though the sky remained cloudy and a cold wind blew.

At one o'clock the boys heard a tapping on their door. Opening it quickly, they found their mother standing there.

"I wondered if you were asleep," she said,

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with a little smile. "Now, this won't do at all. We can't have you wasting your strength, you know. Come down to the kitchen with me, and I'll make some cocoa. Then you're going to take off your things and get in bed—even if I have to tuck you in as I used to, not so long ago. In the morning you have to take Belle over to the 8 X 8, and, after that, there'll be plenty of work to do. So you need all the rest you can get. Come now, we'll get the cocoa made, then it's to bed with both of you!"

"But don't you want us to wait up for dad, Mother?"

"No, Roy. When he comes I'll call you. You must get your sleep. My, listen to that wind!"

After a warming drink, Teddy and Roy, in obedience to their mother's laughing orders, hopped into bed. Both declared that they wouldn't sleep a wink, but, somehow, they could not keep their eyes open, and two o'clock found them deep in slumber. Mrs. Manley it was who watched at the window for the returning horse-men, her hands clasped tightly.

The day was three hours old when Teddy and Roy opened their eyes. Roy was the first one out of bed, and, practically throwing his clothes on, he made for the door. Teddy was a close second, and they descended the stairs together.

Their mother was waiting in the dining

room. She put her finger to her lips and said in a low voice:

"Don't make too much noise, boys. Your father is asleep right above. He came in at five o'clock."

"Did he—did he—" Teddy began tensely.

Mrs. Manley shook her head.

"No luck, boys. He wants you to take Belle over to Peter Ball's place as soon as you can and to hurry back. I wish she would wait until this business is over. Still, I won't be foolish and start to worry. She is so eager to visit Nell and Ethel that I haven't the heart to say she can't. There is not a great deal of opportunity for social life out here. Anyway, I want her to become well acquainted with the two girls, for she may go to New York next winter and she'll be happier if she has friends there. When do you want to start?"

"As soon as Belle can, Mother," Roy answered. "Dad is all right, then?"

"Just tired. He could hardly keep his eyes open, poor man. And he's doing all this to help a friend, too!"

"Dad would do more for a friend than he would for himself," Roy said softly. "Golly, I hope we catch those rustlers! Boy, how I hope it! Teddy, can't you feel old Flash under you once more? And Star! Come on, Ted, let's hurry so we can get back soon! Mom, how soon before Belle will be ready?"

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Mrs. Manley smiled at her son. It was like him to think more of getting his horse back than of capturing the hustlers—the mother knew the great affection that existed between Roy and Star and between Teddy and Flash. Yet, when she thought of the dangers of the chase, her face sobered. Still she did not forbid them to go. She knew that her boys must learn to be men.

The two brothers and their sister were soon ready to start. Cautioning them to be careful, Mrs. Manley kissed them good-bye. They were going on horse back, Belle having her own favorite pony which she could not think of leaving behind.

As they set out, Teddy looked up at the sky.

"More rain," he remarked thoughtfully. "Makes trailing that much harder. Belle, were you up when dad came in?"

"No. But I heard him. He said the men never got a glimpse of the thieves. Then he said something about Harver's Gully, but I didn't quite catch that."

"He did?" Roy asked excitedly. "What was it, Belle? Think!"

"I didn't hear it all, Roy, because he shut the door just then."

"I wonder if they rode over that way!" Teddy exclaimed. "Roy, the more I think of that man we saw, the more I'm sure it was Froud!"

"You saw Gilly Froud?" Belle asked, her eyes wide.

"We weren't sure," Teddy said quickly. Then he changed the subject and suggested that they hurry, as the clouds were getting heavier.

They reached the 8 X 8 after a long ride, finding it in much the same condition as their own ranch. That is, most of the punchers were on the range, trying to get track of their stolen cattle. Bug Eye Wilson remained, "to keep the cook company," as he said, much as he had wanted to ride with the rest. His time would come later unless the rustlers were caught soon.

There was an attitude of quiet determination about the men on the 8 X 8. Teddy noticed that the punchers who remained were talking in low tones and with none of their accustomed banter.

"They're all business," Roy remarked to Teddy. "If those rustlers get away this time they're pretty clever. This last trick they pulled was one too many. They've got the whole country on their necks now."

Needless to say, Nell and Ethel were delighted to see Belle, and also her brothers. But Roy and Teddy could scarcely stay long enough to say "hello." They were anxious to get back, see their father, and join in the chase.

The sky was blacker than ever when they turned and started for home. The wind

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had increased in violence, and the boys bent low in their saddles as they rode.

Three miles out Roy gave a yell.

"Here she comes! She's goin' to be a pip, too! Wow!"

With a sullen roar the storm struck. The rain fell in torrents and the wind whipped the boys' faces stingingly.

"We've got to find shelter!" Teddy shouted. "Can't ride in this! The broncs will fall, sure, and maybe break a leg! Then we'll be out of luck!"

Bracing themselves against the furious blasts, the boys galloped on, searching for some sort of protection. The lightning was flashing almost continually, so they wisely kept out of the vicinity of large trees.

Suddenly Teddy gave a shout.

"There's something ahead! Looks like a house! Let's head for that!"

The boys forced their broncos onward. Through the dashing rain they could see the outlines of a shack.

CHAPTER XXIII

DISCOVERY

PULLING their hats further down on their heads to keep the rain out of their eyes, the two boys directed their ponies toward the cabin. The horses were twitching nervously every time a streak of lightning tore the rain-washed sky, and it took skillful hands to keep them from running wild.

A blinding flash came just as they reached the cabin, and a tree not a hundred yards away fell to the ground with a startling crash. Teddy's pony threw back his head and whinnied in terror.

"Close!" Roy yelled. "Watch that bronco of yours, Teddy! He's a sidewinder!"

The warning was unnecessary, for Teddy at the same moment seized the horse's mane with a firm hand. This had a quieting effect, and the bronco lowered his head once more.

Now they were at the door of the dwelling, and both boys leaped from their mounts. The cabin was a ramshackle affair, simply four walls and a roof, with no porch. There was

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one window in the front and one on the side, neither of which had an unbroken pane. But at least the place afforded shelter, and tying their ponies to a pole which stood at the rear, partly under the eaves, Teddy and Roy ran to the front door.

Seizing the knob, Teddy pushed. The plank door flew open, and the boys entered. The windows allowed some light to penetrate the interior, but, even so, it was dark and dreary within. The boys saw that four chairs were grouped about a rough table. On one side was a couch that had long passed its days of usefulness. A stone fireplace was built in one of the walls, and Roy noticed with relief that there were several pieces of wood piled on the andirons. A door opened into another room, evidently a bed chamber. Above were the bare rafters, opening up to a peaked roof.

Teddy removed his sodden hat and whacked it on the table.

"Wow!" he gasped. "Some rain! Golly, I'm wet through!"

"So am I, I'll tell a maverick!" Roy exclaimed. He looked about him curiously. "We're pretty lucky to stumble on this. Wonder who in thunder ever lived here?"

"Some sheep-herder, most likely," his brother declared. Walking to the door he pushed it more firmly shut. "Thank goodness the roof doesn't leak! Say, look at the wood

in the grate! Seems as if some one had been here not so long ago and intended to come back."

"Well, if he comes back now, he'll find his wood being used," Roy said, with a chuckle. "Got a dry match, Teddy?"

Searching his pockets, Teddy found a box nearly full. The water had not touched them, and in a few moments a fire was crackling merrily.

"This is gravy!" Teddy exclaimed, extending his hands to the warmth. "Baby! Listen to that rain! We'd be about drowned if we were out in that."

"Ever see this place before?" Roy asked, as he took off his vest and hung it on a chair. Neither of the boys wore coats, heavy shirts and vests affording them all the protection they needed in that country at this season.

"Nope. Don't remember. Did you?"

"Don't think so. Let's see what's in that other room."

The door was a trifle hard to open, but Roy put his shoulder against it and shoved. It gave under his weight, and he entered.

For a moment he stood staring.

"Well, what is it?" his brother asked, walking forward. "See a ghost, or something?"

"Mighty funny," Roy said in a puzzled tone, as though to himself. "Take a look!"

He stepped aside, and Teddy peered in.

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What he saw caused him to utter an exclamation.

On the side of the wall was a gun-rack. Hanging from it were seven rifles, all well oiled and polished, as though they had been recently taken care of. On the floor were several boxes of cartridges. But, stranger than this and what had brought the cry of surprise from Teddy, was a pile of queerly shaped implements in one corner.

"Branding irons!" Roy ejaculated. "Branding irons, as sure as you're a foot high! Can you beat that?"

"They sure are!" Teddy cried excitedly. Bending over, he picked one up. "Roy! See here!"

The older boy looked eagerly at the object in his brother's hand. It was a square piece of iron fastened to a wooden handle, and between the handle and the plate was a piece of fluted and corrugated metal, to allow rapid radiation of heat and prevent the burning of the wood. Teddy turned the iron over. On the face, in raised characters, was marked: 8 X 8.

"Pete Ball's brand!" Roy exclaimed. "Now what—"

"If they had a sign on the door, 'Horse Thieves,' they couldn't tell us plainer than this," Teddy interrupted.

"But this is an 8 X 8 branding iron," put in

Roy slowly. "They wouldn't want to brand the cattle they stole with the same brand."

Instead of replying, Teddy picked up another one of the irons. This had a small circle at each end and four curves between.

"I'll bet this is a fake branding iron!" cried the younger ranch lad triumphantly. "Don't you see, Roy? They can stamp this fake iron directly over the 8 X 8 and that will make an entirely different brand, having a three-leafed clover at each end with a curved rope uniting them."

"Say, I've heard something about that before!" came quickly from the older boy. "Don't you remember dad's talking once about the Rope and Clover brand which was used by some rustlers in upper Montana? I'll bet this is the same kind of outfit!"

"It certainly looks that way!"

The two brothers examined the fake iron and the real one with care, and then Teddy turned to his brother.

"The question is—what is to be done?" he demanded.

"Well, what can we do? Seems like it's raining harder than ever now. Even if we did cut for home and tell the gang what we've found, what good would it do? It's a cinch those rustlers won't come back when they know we're watching this cabin."

"But do they have to know that? Why

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can't we get the bunch, sneak back, and lay for those horse and cattle thieves? They'll return sooner or later, because their guns and stuff are here."

Roy thought for a moment.

"It's a chance," he said finally. "Of course, they may come back while we're gone and cart their things away. But we've got to risk that. The only thing is, if we stayed here ourselves we'd be sure to see them and maybe we could follow them to their hiding place where they keep the cattle. Then we'd have them cold—our horses too. That is, if this is the same bunch that stole Star and Flash and General."

"Don't you worry about that! There's only one gang of rustlers about here, and they do all the jobs. And Froud is one of them, I'll bet! So is Checkered Shirt." Teddy tossed the branding iron into the corner. "But if we did stay here, and even if the rustlers did return, how do we know they'd lead us to their cache? And suppose they caught us and we got plugged? That whole gang would head for the border, pronto, and drive their stolen cattle before them. They'd take our bronses with them, most likely, and that'd be the end. Nope, Roy, we'd better get the rest of our fellows and try to capture the thieves when they come back here."

Roy walked to the door, which had blown partly closed, and flung it open savagely.

"I sure hate to leave here!" he declared, his mouth pressed into a thin line. "This bunch has got our broncos, I know it! What I'd like to do would be to wait here till they showed up, then with these rifles, make 'em tell where the horses are. I'm getting sick and tired of this waiting business. Can't tell what they've done to Star! If I find he's been beaten—"

"Take it easy, Roy," Teddy said softly. "You're doing the very thing you always tell me not to do—lose my temper. That won't get us any place. I want Flash back as much as you want Star, but we've got to go at it carefully. Snap out of it now!"

"Guess you're right," Roy replied, with a slight grin. "I got sore for a minute, seeing those irons and things and thinking of Star. We'll start for home and tell dad what we found, collect Nick and the rest and mosey back here as fast as we can. Baby! I hope the rustlers are here then! Come on, Teddy, let's go! Rain or no rain, we'll nab those thieves!"

Roy grabbed his vest from the back of the chair and made for the front door. He was just about to dash out into the storm when Teddy caught his arm.

"Think we better put the fire out?" the boy asked. "If they come back and find that going,

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they'll know something's up and they'll move plenty quick!"

"Right!" Roy exclaimed approvingly. "You're sure using the old bean, Teddy. Out she goes!"

Seizing a poker that stood by the side of the grate, Roy scattered the embers. He was about to ask Teddy to get some water when a slight sound at the door made both boys turn quickly.

Startled, they watched the slow twisting of the door knob. Roy took a firmer grip on the poker. Softly the door opened, a crack at first, then wider. Of a sudden, it was flung hard against the wall, and Teddy and Roy started back.

In the door way stood a man. His peaked hat was pulled low over his eyes. His face was sickly pale, the cheeks were sunken in. His shoulders drooped forward, his arms hung weakly down at his sides. His checkered shirt was ripped open on the left shoulder. Water dripped from him in great drops. And, as Teddy watched, he saw that these drops were tinged with red.

CHAPTER XXIV

BRAND

THE man looked at the two boys with dull eyes. He opened his mouth as though to speak, then put his hand to his head. He swayed uncertainly for a moment, gave a little cough, and pitched headlong to the floor.

"He's hurt!" Roy cried, springing forward. "Teddy, shut that door! Help me lift him nearer the fire! Golly, he's bleedin' like a stuck pig!"

Together the boys carried the wounded man closer to the warmth of the fire. Luckily it still had some live embers, and Roy quickly piled these together and added fresh wood so that they flamed once more.

Teddy noticed that the man's lips were blue and his closed eyes were sunk deep in his head. The boy leaned over and swiftly opened the man's shirt. From the top of the left shoulder to the breast ran a red gash.

"Knifed!" Roy exclaimed. "If we don't stop that bleeding soon, he'll cash in!"

"A tourniquet—it's the only chance," came from Teddy. "Can you make one?"

"Think so—though the cut is in a mighty

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tough place.” Always at his best in emergencies, Roy ran to the other room and twisted the wooden handle off one of the branding irons. Then, with his jackknife, he cut the injured man’s sleeve off at the shoulder, and bound it about the man’s chest and shoulder so that it pressed against the main arteries. He inserted the handle of the iron under the cloth, and twisted.

Slowly the blood stopped flowing.

“Got it!” Roy cried triumphantly. “Now I’ve got to hold this until she clots. I don’t think any of the large arteries are cut, but it won’t do to take a chance. Teddy—” he added in a questioning voice.

His brother nodded.

“I know. Recognized him as soon as he came in. Checkered Shirt!”

“Well, he’s harmless now. That’s a terrible wound. Wonder how it happened!”

Teddy shook his head.

“Hard to say. Poor geezer, I feel sorry for him, even if he is one of Froud’s gang. He stands a fair chance of passing out, and we can’t do much for him. Want me to try to get help while you watch here? If we could find a doctor in time—”

The ranch boy stopped. The man’s eyes opened and his lips moved feebly. Roy bent closer.

“What is it?” he asked gently. “Just take

it easy now. You're all right. Just lie quiet."

"Froud—Froud—" the man whispered.
"Stabbed me—"

Roy looked up with startled eyes.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded. "He says Froud stabbed him! Yes, I'm listening."

"Knifed me—" the man faltered. He struggled to sit up, but Roy prevented this. The man's fist clenched and his voice came more strongly.

"The rat!" he cried. "Cut me—without givin' me no chance. I'll get him for this!" He expelled his breath in a long sigh. "Water," he gasped. "Water. Pump in back."

Teddy nodded, and ran to the rear. He returned in a moment with a tin cup full of water and held it to the man's lips. After drinking deep, the man turned his head from side to side.

"Better now," he declared in a weak voice. Then his eyes caught Teddy's face. "I know you! Manley—Bard Manley's son, ain't you? And—" He looked at Roy and a slight grin twisted his mouth. "Well, if this ain't the beatenest! Bein' helped by the very guys who—who—" he stopped.

"Whose horses you stole?" Teddy finished.
"Is that what you mean?"

The man shook his head.

"Not me! I didn't rustle yore hosses. But

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what I was goin' to—to—" a fit of coughing wracked his whole frame. Roy tightened the tourniquet slightly, so that the bleeding would not begin again. When the man regained control of himself Teddy gave him another drink, and he grinned his gratitude. Then, for the first time, he noticed the stick of wood entwined in the improvised bandage. He looked at it curiously.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked.

"Guess you know," Roy declared shortly. "It's the handle to an 8 X 8 branding iron."

A flicker of amusement appeared in the man's eyes. Then he started to laugh. Weakly at first, then louder, until Teddy feared he might be becoming delirious. But in a moment the laughter ceased, to give way to a sardonic smile.

"Ain't that luck for you?" He looked at the stick once more. "Savin' my life with a rustler's branding iron! An' me—I'm the rustler! Can you beat it?"

"Never mind that now," Teddy said. "What were you saying when that cough hit you?"

"Give me a chance, will you?" the man snarled. "Here I am dyin', maybe, an' you keep askin' questions! It's funny, though—it sure is funny—"

"You won't die unless you get strung up," Roy asserted coolly. "Better come clean.

Who are you? Do you know where our horses are?"

For a moment the man did not answer. He appeared to be turning something over in his mind. Then suddenly he hammered his fist on the floor, and raised himself on one elbow.

"I'll tell," he said forcibly. "I'll tell you the whole thing! I'm done with Gilly Froud—the rat! He tried his best to kill me! Now listen!"

The fire flared up, and Roy and Teddy bent over the injured man. Outside the rain had stopped, but the sky was still overcast, so that shadows thrown by the dancing flames played cheerily about in the dim light of the room. A horse whinnied softly, but neither Roy nor Teddy heard it. The man on the floor took a deep breath and continued:

"My name—never mind my name. You wouldn't know it, anyway. My business you gotta know—I'm a rustler." He paused for a moment.

"One of Gilly Froud's gang?" Roy asked eagerly.

"Gilly Froud's gang? No! You think that sneak has got nerve enough to boss a bunch of rustlers? He was one of my gang until now, an' I hope he gets it good! Thought he could kill me an' take all the cattle for himself—left me for dead an' rode away. But I fooled him! I ain't dead yet, by a long shot! I waited till

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I saw him go, then I started on foot—he'd taken my bronc. Somehow I couldn't stop this bleedin', an' I got weaker. Then it started to rain, an' I said, 'Well, here goes nothin'.' I made for this shack, thinkin' I'd come here an' die, where I kept my brandin' irons—an' right good irons they are, too, if I do say it myself! I wanted to take one more look at 'em. Had an idea that the 8 X 8 brand wasn't just perfect, an' I wanted to find out before I passed on. You see, we sometimes have to use the old iron with the new." He looked up at Roy, who was holding the wooden handle of the tourniquet. "Was it all right? Does that curl on the eight look real?"

"It does," Roy answered, glancing down with a puzzled expression. A man who thought he was dying wanting to take a last look at the irons with which he branded stolen horses!

"Glad of that," the wounded man said, with a sigh. "I never made a mistake on an iron in my life, an' I just wanted to satisfy myself before I kicked the bucket. Well, I guess you know the rest. Here I am. What are you goin' to do with me?"

"But our horses!" Teddy demanded. "Where are they?"

"Oh, they're safe. We got 'em corralled with the cattle. I said I didn't steal 'em, and I didn't. But I saw 'em stolen. I was leanin' against Rimor's Place that day you met me.

It was Froud that took yore broncs. He said yore dad kicked him off yore ranch, an' he wanted to get even. I tole him to ferget it, but he wouldn't. Said he'd get square if it was the last thing he ever did—that he wanted to finish beatin' a certain hoss. It was this that turned me against him. I may be a rustler, but I never beat no hoss ! Nor hurt one!"

"Did Froud beat the pony?" Teddy asked, his eyes gleaming with a strange light. "Did he?"

"Started to. I seen him, an' made him quit. Guess he got sore at me then, an' decided to do me an' keep the cattle we rustled fer himself!"

Teddy looked at the man sympathetically.

"You wouldn't let him whip Flash? I'll remember that. Go ahead. Tell us where our ponies are."

"Will you let me go if I do?" the man asked cunningly.

Roy glanced at his brother. Teddy knew what was in Roy's mind, for it was in his own, too. They could get Flash, Star, and General back. Also, they might recapture the cattle stolen from the 8 X 8. If they could get Froud, too, and jail him, together with the other rustlers, the country would be rid of a band of rascals.

On the other hand, here was the man who had confessed that he was the ringleader. If

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they let him go, he might start another gang and create more disturbance.

"Will you promise to give up horse stealing if we do?" Roy demanded.

The man looked up. His eyes seemed strangely as though they were laughing, but his mouth never moved.

"Now, wait a second, buddy. You don't know what yore askin'. Me, I been a rustler fer years, an' I don't know nothin' else. I can copy any brandin' iron an' I can work a brand over into another so you'd never know the difference. There ain't nobody who can do that as well as me, if I do say it myself. Me, I ain't a hoss thief. I'm a brand-iron artist." He grinned widely. "But I'll tell you what. You let me go, an' I'll tell you where yore broncs are and where all the cattle we stole from this section is hidden. An' then I'll promise—an' I ain't never went back on my word yet—that I'll leave this state an' never come back."

Roy stared him straight in the eyes. They stared back, unwavering, sincere.

"I believe you," the boy declared. "Spill it. You go free."

A broad smile came over the man's face. He thrust out his hand, and the boys grasped it in turn.

"Listen," he said eagerly, "an' listen good. Froud is plannin' to raid yore father's herd

to-night. He's goin' to cut the fence on the north side an' get as many Durhams as he can an' drive 'em to Cottonwood Bowl, over near Harver's Gully. That's where yore brones are. I was supposed to be in on this, 'cause I planned it. But he'll go through with it all right. I know him. He's money-mad! He held up a flivver the other night just 'cause he thought it was carryin' jewelry. I didn't want to have nothin' to do with it, but I rode along to see there wouldn't be no unnecessary shootin'. I ain't no sneak thief—nor a murderer, neither. Maybe you know about the flivver? From the 8 X 8, it was."

Both boys nodded.

"Go ahead!" Teddy exclaimed. "Just where is this Cottonwood Bowl?"

The man chuckled.

"You'd never find it in a million years if you didn't know where to look," Checkered Shirt went on. "I discovered it, an' you couldn't get a better place fer hidin' cattle if you tried. First you head fer Harver's Gully. You know where that is, hey? Well, there's a hill on the other side. Don't go up that. Foller the river to the left, and you'll come to a big rock. Climb that. Then you'll see soon enough where the Bowl is. Baby, it's sweet, sweet!"

"An' you'll find yore brones with the short-horns from the 8 X 8. The brand ain't been changed yet. The way I work, I make an iron

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just like the original. Then I teases the letters into somethin' else till even the owner wouldn't know his own brand. But I got to have the original exact to do it. That's why I asked you if—"

"Yes, but we haven't time! What else about that raid on our ranch?" Teddy interrupted.

"It's to-night, like I told you! On the north side of the fence! An', boys, I hope you get Froud! Go to it!"

Teddy straightened up.

"Roy, here's our chance to get our horses back and capture Froud! We've got to get to dad! You—er—"

"Call me Brand," the man said, with a grin.

"Brand, can you ride? Will you go with us?"

Brand shook his head.

"I stay here. Just cart some water for me, and you'll find some bread an' meat in a closet in back. An' you might hand me down a rifle, just in case. I'll be all right. I'll rest up, an' you can bring a doc when you come back. Then when I feel better, I'll be ridin' on. Snap to it now. You ain't got much time."

For a moment Roy hesitated. Gently he unwound the tourniquet. The bleeding had stopped, and the cut seemed to be closing. If the fellow who called himself Brand kept quiet for a while, there was every chance that the injury would soon mend.

Teddy fetched the water and food and laid them by the side of the man, together with a rifle and a box of cartridges. Then he jerked a blanket off the couch and threw it over the figure on the floor. This done, the boys prepared to leave.

“So long, boys! Remember me to Froud—with an ounce of lead! Ride’ em, buckers! Go get ’em!”

Teddy and Roy made for the door. In a moment they were on their ponies.

A cold wind cut their faces as they raced across the range. Night was fast approaching. The prairie lay like a sodden blanket beneath a gray sky.

In the cabin they had just left, a man pulled himself across the floor and into the next room. His hand reached out toward a pile of branding irons, and his fingers closed over the one without a handle. Clutching this, he struggled back to the fire, and held it to catch the glow of the dying embers. His fingers passed gently over the raised surface. Then with a sigh of satisfaction he sank back and watched the last sparks fade into blackness.

CHAPTER XXV

THE ROUND-UP

THE first stars were peeping from a cloud-strewn sky when Roy and Teddy rode into the yards of the X Bar X. Without waiting to tie up their horses, they rushed into the house. Mrs. Manley was talking to Norine in the living room.

"Mother!" Teddy exclaimed, "where's dad? Is he in?"

"Just went toward the corral, Teddy," Mrs. Manley answered. Then, as she saw Teddy's face, she asked: "What happened? Is Belle all right? She didn't—"

"Nothing like that at all, Mom!" Roy cried, giving her a quick hug. "We've got good news. We know where our horses are!"

"Do you, now?" Norine broke in, her eyes alight. "Then I'm glad! I missed those ponies, so I did!"

"You'd better hurry after your father," Mrs. Manley admonished. "He's riding again to-night after the rustlers. I do wish this were over!"

"It will be soon, Mom!" declared Teddy, "Don't worry now—we'll have that gang before morning!"

"But, boys, you're all wet! You really must get some dry clothes on!"

"When we find dad, Mom! Want to reach him before he leaves! Come on, Teddy!"

The boys rushed from the room. Mrs. Manley turned to Norine with something very much akin to pride in her eyes. Her boys were already men!

Teddy reached his father just as the ranchman was throwing a saddle on a bronco. The boys told their story quickly.

"To-night, hey?" Mr. Manley pondered. "Well, sons, you sure did a fine piece of work. Now for the round-up of those rustlers! Teddy, go to the bunk-house and tell the boys to get over here, pronto! Tell 'em to bring guns! Then you an' Roy get some food in you an' some dry clothes on. This is the last act, boys! We ring the curtain down on that gang to-night!"

Later, a small crowd of men sat on restless horses. From each belt hung a heavy revolver, and in more than a few saddle-cases reposed long-barreled rifles. Nick Looker was there, and Pop Burns and Gus Tripp, now recovered, and Jim Casey, and four other punchers. Teddy and Roy were on either side of their father.

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“Boys,” Mr. Manley called, “we’re set! To the north fence—and don’t make any noise! When you get there lay low. Keep your brones still. When I see the rustlers I’ll fire one shot—then close in, an’ close in quick! Understand? Then let’s go!”

There was a clatter of hoofs as the horses galloped over the ground. During that ride hardly a word was spoken. Then the wait began. Time seemed to stand still. The shadowy clouds disappeared, and the moon shone forth, silhouetting the group of watching punchers. A breeze sighed through the branches of a small grove of evergreens. Now and then a pony whinnied nervously, to be instantly quieted by a firm hand on his nostrils.

“Snakes, this is like waitin’ for an explosion when yore sittin’ on top of th’ dynamite!” whispered Pop, who was close to Roy. “If somethin’ don’t happen soon—”

Roy raised his hand. From the west seven riders came flashing over the moon-flooded prairie, straight for the fence. The leader leaped from his horse and, pulling something from his pocket, rested his hand on the top wire. There was a sharp crack as the strand parted.

A single shot rang out. Then a yell.

“Get ’em, boys!” Roy shouted. “They’re our meat! Get the one with the pliers in his hand—that’s Froud!”

Ponies sprang forward. Guns leaped from holsters and were leveled at the astounded rustlers. Three of the latter turned in a flash and rode off like the wind, rifles cracking them a farewell.

The man on foot looked about him desperately. In the moonlight the scar on his face seemed like a small, silver snake crawling up his face. He saw himself being surrounded by determined cowboys with murderous guns in their hands.

With a cowardly yell, his courage fled and he fell to his knees.

"Don't shoot!" he begged, his whole body shaking. "Don't shoot me! These men made me do it! They forced me into it! I ain't done nothin'. I swear I ain't! I even killed the head of this gang, Brand! You ought to let me off for doin' that!"

Teddy looked down at the groveling figure. He turned and glanced at the other rustlers, who, realizing that the game was up, stood quietly by, hands held high in the air.

"Brave leader you've got," the boy said.

One of the men looked down with a contemptuous sneer.

"Him? He ain't no leader. He's a yeller dog! Wait an' I'll fix him for you. Hear what he said about Brand? I knew somethin' was up. The rat said Brand told him to go ahead with the raid an' he'd meet us at the

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Bowl. So you killed Brand, did you? Well, kiss yoreself good-bye, 'cause yore sure goin' on a long journey!"

The man's hand flashed down to his side. There was a crack, and a tongue of flame belched from the muzzle. Froud gave a shrill scream and gripped his left shoulder at the same moment that Roy and Nick rode closer and covered the fellow who had shot.

But the man did not fire again.

"I'm gettin' pretty poor," he said in a sad voice. "Don't worry, son, I won't do no more shootin'. Here, take the gun. I won't have no use for it where I'm goin'. 'Bout time I had a rest, I guess. First time I ever failed to kill a snake with one shot. And at ten paces, too! Yo're lucky, Froud! Look at him wiggle! Let's hear you sound yore rattles, you cussed sidewinder!"

"That'll do," Mr. Manley said sternly, riding up. "You almost had a charge of murder against you—though it don't seem like murder to shoot a snake. Froud, stop that yellin'! You ain't killed! Get on your feet. Let's see." Mr. Manley dismounted, and, ripping the man's shirt open, disclosed a small gash in the fleshy part of the shoulder.

"You snivilin' coward!" the cattle owner cried. "All that shoutin' over a scratch! Get on your brone now, an' be quick about it! We're ridin' in. Nick an' Gus, stay in back.

Keep your guns out. The rest of you ride close. If any one makes a break, shoot an' shoot straight! Here's where this rustlin' stops, once an' for all! We'll find out from these rats who those were who got away. Then they won't dare show their faces around here again."

"Don't let him get near me," Froud whined, pointing at the man who had shot him. "He'll kill me if he can! He was Brand's friend—"

"An' you knifed Brand," Mr. Manley finished, with a fierce frown. "You rat! You ought to be strung up!"

"But it ain't murder to kill a rustler, is it?" Froud asked eagerly. "It ain't! I could get a reward fer doin' it, couldn't I? He's wanted! The police in three states want him! So if I show you his body I get the reward, don't I? Don't I?"

Mr. Manley looked at him.

"Froud," he said slowly, "I seen some snakes in my time. At least, till now I thought I had. I can't blame that buckner for shootin' you. Too bad he wasn't a better shot. Froud, listen to this! Brand ain't dead! He's alive, an' he's lookin' for you!"

Froud's face went livid. He swayed in his saddle.

"He—he—ain't dead?" he stammered. "But—I—"

"You tried your best! But it wasn't quite

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good enough, an' my boys here saved his life. He got to that cabin of yours, an' Roy an' Teddy bound up his wound. He told everything, an' he'll be in the saddle again in two weeks. Froud, you're a marked man!"

The rustler caught at the saddle horn. He trembled as though with the ague, and wet his lips with his tongue. He strove to speak, but the words would not come.

"Save 'em," Nick Looker said in a contemptuous voice. "You might need later all the talk you got. Come on now! Ride on! We ain't got all night. All right, boss? Do we go?"

"We go, Nick! An' don't worry about watchin' Froud. If he starts to fall off, you might prop him back on again. Boys, we're off! We're headin' home with a rare cargo! Let's go!"

The procession of horsemen filed into the yard of the X Bar X just as the gray dawn was breaking. On all but four of the riders were happy grins. One of these four sagged low in the saddle. Frequently his tongue ran over his dry lips. And on the side of his face a scar, like a small snake, shone livid against his sickly pallor.

Teddy and Roy could hardly wait to ride to Cottonwood Bowl. Swallowing a hasty breakfast, they started, together with Nick and Pop. Mr. Manley stayed at the ranch to guard

the prisoners until the sheriff from Hawley could take them into custody.

As the riders reached the spot Brand had described, Teddy mounted the rock and parted the brush which grew on top. He looked over. Then he gave a yell.

"Flash! And Star and General! Running around like colts! Take a look, Roy! Take a look! Baby! Let's get down there quick! Here's the path around to the left! Come on, Roy! Hurry up! Wow, you old bronc you! Be with you in a minute!"

"Just like kids," Nick said to Pop, with a grin, as the two brothers ran down the path toward the enclosure. "They're crazy to get their ponies under them, an' I don't know as I blame 'em! Golly—watch 'em! Look at Roy! By jimminy, he's *kissin'* the bronc! Now he's on—so is Teddy! Yay, boy! See 'em go! Ride 'em, cowboy! Yay!"

Around the Bowl the boys flashed, milling the small herd of cattle like veterans. Then they broke the cows and ran them out of the Bowl into the path. Aided by Nick and Pop, they started the drive for the X Bar X, leading General and their other horses.

"Take a look at him!" Roy exclaimed, patting Star's side. "Skin shines like satin! Must have taken good care of you, bronc! That's another thing we've got to thank Check-

ered Shirt for. Golly, it's good to be astride again!"

"Same here!" Teddy cried. "Gee, I never expected to see this ole horse again! Did I, you crazy coot, you? Nope, he says! Never did! See him nod his head? Atta baby! Speak up!"

"Yo're sure happy, ain't you?" Pop grinned.

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy exploded. "Why shouldn't we be? An' wait till dad sees General! Boy! He won't be *very* glad!"

At last they reached the X Bar X with the cattle. It was a long, dusty, hot ride, but to Teddy and Roy it was just a pleasure jaunt. The cattle were placed in the X Bar X corral until Mr. Ball should send for them. Mr. Manley was overjoyed to see General again, and insisted on riding with the two boys back to the cabin where they had left Checkered Shirt, although Mrs. Manley was sure they would fall asleep in their saddles. They decided that it would be better to bring the wounded man back to the ranch if he could be moved, rather than to waste time getting a doctor to the out-of-the-way cabin.

To his wife's objection that he needed rest, Mr. Manley answered:

"Don't worry about us, Barbara. We won't fall asleep. Not on these broncs! Hey, Teddy? Nick, when the sheriff comes, tell a few of the boys to saddle up and help him

bring those four galoots to Hawley. Guess they won't give you no trouble. All right, boys, let's go!"

When Mr. Manley and his two sons reached the cabin they noticed that the door was open. Dismounting, they walked in.

The shack was deserted. On the floor in front of the fireplace was a branding iron, resting on a piece of paper. Bending over, Teddy picked the paper up. On it were the words:

"Thanks fer helpin me out. Sorry I got to leev so soon, but I gess you no wy. My cut is mos better. Think Ill tak yore advice an quit rustlin. I just noticed the X on this iron ain't korreck. The top is to large. So Im quittin. So long. Good luck to you.

"BRAND."

"Can you beat that?" Roy said, with a chuckle. "Stopping because he made a mistake in a branding iron! Funny rustler, isn't he? I sort of like him, though. He's no coward. Well, we may as well start back. Baby, I'm getting sleepy! Wait!" He seized the iron that lay on the floor. "For a souvenir. We'll remember this summer, anyway! So long, Checkered Shirt! Good luck to you, too!"

Indeed, the summer did linger long in the

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boys' memories. More exciting times were in store for them, as will be told in the next book, called "The X Bar X Boys in Thunder Canyon." But they never forgot their adventures while chasing the rustlers and looking for their stolen horses.

As they mounted and turned their faces toward home, Roy looked over at Teddy. Mr. Manley smiled, for he knew what was coming.

"Want to ride over to see Curly tomorrow?" the boy asked, with a grin.

Teddy smiled casually.

"My boy," he said, "your innocence is sublime! We will ride to see Nell, and maybe Ethel will be there. How about that?"

"Race you to that bush!" Roy returned. "Come on, Dad! Get in this! Let's see what General can do!"

With a yell the three started. Over the prairie they raced, their laughter ringing high.

Neck and neck the three ponies reached the bush, and with happy hearts the two boys and their father rode homeward.

THE END

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